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DEFYING THE MODERNIST CANON: MIKHAIL LARIONOV'S ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE CANVAS

Ella Hans

University of Kentucky, ella.hans@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

DEFYING THE MODERNIST CANON: MIKHAIL LARIONOV'S ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE CANVAS

In the contemporary art-historical vision, Mikhail Larionov is renowned as the author and the main figure in the polemical discourse of Neoprimitivism and the inventor of the Rayonism style. These aspects, although crucial to his career, are far from exhausting the artist's legacy. During his most industrious period, from 1910 to 1915, he was equally, if not more, engaged in the development of new forms of art than in the practice of painting; in fact, the conventional cornerstone of the high art in the era of Modernism – a painting – lost its central position and receded to the status of the peripheral phenomenon in his artistic practice. When considering his position as a central figure in the events of the 1910-1915 in Russia, Larionov's ambivalence as an artist implies hesitation about the picture of gestalt homogeneity of Modernist discourse (with a painting as the hierarchical apex of high art in the Modernist era) in Russia of the early decades of the twentieth century. While historical evaluation privileges the painting over the non-painting practice of the artist, there is sufficient evidence testifying to the need to consider them as equal and synergetic.

KEYWORDS: Mikhail Larionov, Russian Avant-garde, Kinetic Art, Russian Film, Performance Art

Ella Hans

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By

Ella Hans

Robert Jensen, Ph.D.
Director of Thesis

Jane Peters, Ph.D.
Director of Graduate Studies

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MIKHAIL LARIONOV'S ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE CANVAS

Ella Hans

The Graduate School
University of Kentucky

2011

DEFYING THE MODERNIST CANON:
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THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Fine Arts
at the University of Kentucky

By

Ella Hans

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Robert Jensen, Professor of Art History

Lexington, Kentucky

2011

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Years ago, once I had acknowledged to myself that my passion for art was not accompanied by an artistic talent of any significance, I shifted my focus towards learning how to write about art clearly. In English. Even today, whenever I attempt to do so, I find myself in everlasting jumble of linguistic, rhetorical, translational, and content struggles, and sometimes the light in the end of the tunnel remains dim till the very end. In this acknowledgement note, I would like to express my gratitude to those who led me on this path.

My Thesis Chair, Dr. Robert Jensen, the kind of scholar to which I aspire, remained being my loyal mentor and the person who challenged and inspired me, provided direction, dedication, and invaluable support throughout my entire MA program experience. Dr. Anna Brzyski provided instructive comments and evaluation for my work, and allowed me to complete this project with much better quality than I would ever achieve without her help. Dr. Jane Peters, in addition to being a contributive and attentive thesis reader, has not once failed to help me with burdensome organizational and schedule issues.

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I. Introduction

Mikhail Fyodorovich Larionov's (1881-1964) last active appearance on the Moscow art scene occurred in March of 1915 at the group show "Vystavka Zhivopisi. 1915 God" ["Exhibition of Painting. 1915"], where the artist presented a number of works, including two unusual pieces—both portraits of Natalia Goncharova, one subtitled *Plasticheskij Luchism* [Plastic Rayonism], which referred to Larionov's recent theory defining Rayonism as "the struggle between the plastic emanations radiating from all things," and another titled *Iron Battle*.¹ In a 1915 editorial on the show titled "At the Iron Dead End," Yan Tugenkhold commented on Mikhail Larionov's last exhibition practice in Russia:

This time the Moscovites have not limited themselves merely to sticking pieces of paper onto their canvases. For Larionov, simply sticking cuttings from theatrical posters onto his portrait of Goncharova, to remind the public of her work on *Le Coq d'Or* and *The Fan*, was altogether inadequate, far too basic and not ambiguous enough. He decided that it was possible to abandon the canvas altogether, by showing the public *real* things which are either painted in bright colors or left as they are. So in his other "portrait" of Goncharova made out of bits of paper, he has attached a real piece of [her] hair.²

Andrea Schemshchurin—a contemporary and a colleague of Mikhail Larionov—provided additional descriptive detail about Larionov's contribution to the 1915 show:

Larionov hung on the wall [next to an electric fan] his wife's braided hair, a hat box, some newspaper cutouts, a map, etc., etc. When everything was ready,

¹Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and The Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), 145

²Ibid., 146

Larionov took a spectator by the hand and turned on the fan to demonstrate his work in complete state [the electric fan made the loosely-hung hair and paper move rapidly].³

Here as in his other exhibitions before 1915 Larionov demonstrated his talent to steal a show; contemporary reviews of the exhibition repeatedly refer to Larionov's work and especially refer to his use of the electric fan to set objects into motion.⁴ On the hand, critical commentary on Larionov's work almost never went beyond mere excitement or indignant descriptions of the scandalous character of the artist's work. Except for Waldemar George voicing (very much later, in 1966) the suggestion that Larionov was a progenitor of kinetic sculpture, nobody considered Larionov's use of the fan (and other comparable innovations from the show) worthy of analysis, interpretation, or any other forms of professional evaluation.⁵ Given that painting on canvas was essentially the only recognized art form accepted into the canon of important artistic practice at the time this critical lacuna is perhaps unsurprising. Yet this indifference toward Larionov's innovations in non-traditional media has persisted through the years that followed, even when art audiences became used to and embraced alternative forms of art. This indifference is even more remarkable when one considers that other artists later produced works rather similar in concept and visual logic to Larionov's, which came to be widely

³E. Inshakova "Na Grani Elitarnoj I Massovoj Kul'tur. K Osmysleniyu "Igrovogo Prostranstva" Russkogo Avangarda" [On the Verge of the Elitist and Mass Cultures. Understanding the Playground of Russian Avant-garde] in *Obsjektivnyye Nauki i Sovremennost'* (Moscow, 2001): 162 - 174.

⁴ Parton, 175.

⁵ Parton, 176

renowned as kinetic art. The kinetic art form can generally be characterized by three-dimensional works that, although embodying diverse and overlapping styles and techniques, contain indispensable parts—moving elements—and understood as completed work when in motion.

Despite being possibly the earliest known example of kinetic art, Larionov's work has not been mentioned as an example of such, let alone recognized in the annals of art history as a pioneering corpus in kinetic art. Both Russian and Western art historical narratives have invariably asserted that kinetic art originated in 1920 with Naum Gabo's *Standing Wave* sculpture and the theoretical writing that he and Antoine Pevsner published under the title *Realist Manifesto*.⁶ Given the material and historical significance attributed to works conceptually and visually similar to Larionov's work, and given the persistent disregard for Larionov's work, one is led to question whether the omission of Larionov's praxis is legitimate and whether contemporary considerations limiting Larionov's oeuvre to the genre of painting have been and perhaps continue to be shortsighted.

In the last years of his life in Russia (he left Russia for good in 1915), Larionov's highly complex and multifaceted practice of art went far beyond the conventional genres and media of the period; the kinetic art pieces from the 1915 show constitute just a few of Larionov's many innovations. Specifically, Larionov was also experimenting at the time with silent film as a medium for art production, his development of the countenance painting and as an independent art genre (not to be misunderstood as a form of body art design but as a form of art where a human body served as the peripatetic base of an

⁶ <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=148> cited on June 24, 2009

artwork) produced both the visual and theoretical body of work. Furthermore, his projects of Futurist (Russian) *samorunnnye knigi* (together with Kruchenyh) developed an entirely new form of art production. His extraordinary work on the reconfiguration of one's artistic persona through self-marketing and show curatorship is also a remarkable point in the artist's career; his exhibition promotion practices consistently challenged the established norms and boundaries of the high art of the time.

In the contemporary art-historical discourse, Mikhail Larionov appears as one among several central figures of the period 1910-1915 (referred to as the first generation of the Russian avant-garde in English language and as the early Russian avant-garde in Russian literature). As a painter, Larionov worked in both naturalistic and abstract styles. He is recognized in international and Russian art historical discourse as the main figure in the polemical dialogue of Neoprimitivism. He has been credited with the invention of Rayism (also known as Rayonism and Luchism), at once a philosophical discourse and a painting style developed primarily in response to French Analytical Cubism and Kandinsky's then-recent theories on abstract art. Larionov's artistic reputation is primarily connected with these two significant, though short-lived movements of 1910-1914, which have essentially determined the critical perception of Larionov's oeuvre.

As the inventor of Rayonism and a pioneer of Russian Neo-Primitivism and abstract painting, Larionov already stands as one of the most productive and innovative Russian artists of the twentieth century. These two aspects of Larionov's artistic career, though beyond question pivotal to understanding the artist's entire body of work, nonetheless far from exhausted his contributions to art practice. His fame as a painter constitutes only one, and possibly not the most important, of the artist's identities. The

alternatives to his painting practice, although they usually fall outside the scope of art historical studies on Larionov and therefore currently represent a more obscure part of his oeuvre, are of central importance in understanding and defining the artist's work and merit future observation in a work more extensive than either this thesis or currently existing publications on the artist's legacy. At present, historical writing that addresses the artist's anarchical practices of multiple genres and styles persistently focuses on his role as a painter. Moreover, his anarchical art practices are often treated as biographical material on Larionov.⁷ Thus far Larionov's activities outside of painting have not been analyzed on their own merit or as equally worthy components of his overall oeuvre, despite the fact that to the end of his most industrious period, from 1910 to 1914, Larionov engaged himself with such practices at least as much, if not more, than he did with painting.

Despite its omission to date, the conceptual diversity and depth of Larionov's non-painting material presented in the artist's oeuvre provides sufficient material for a much-needed and long overdue analysis of this part of Larionov's legacy in an art historical context. It is only if and when both parts of Larionov's oeuvre—the canvas and the non-canvas—are granted equal art historical attention, that one stands a chance to fully understand and define Larionov's body of work. The established narrative for Larionov as a canvas artist must be reevaluated; the central position currently held by his work as a painter in art historical discourse does not credibly represent the diversity of

⁷Anthony Parton's *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-garde*—currently a centerpiece of contemporary academic research on the artist's body of work—presents almost an exclusion from such a disposition towards Larionov's art practice. Parton brilliantly performed a grand task of documentation of Larionov's oeuvre – both his paintings and the non-painting practices. Nonetheless, the latter appears in Parton's discussion mostly in a manner of description rather than analysis of the non-painting part of Larionov's oeuvre.

Larionov's art practice during his most prominent period as an artist. Furthermore, when taking into consideration his position as a central figure in the art world of 1910-1914 in Russia, one's awareness of Larionov's ambivalence of style and genre casts doubt upon the gestalt homogeneity of Modernist discourse on early twentieth century Russia, which elevates painting as the apex of high art in the period.⁸ The non-painting aspects of Larionov's oeuvre interrogate the contemporary understanding and presentation of both Larionov's practice and the Early Russian Avant-garde period in art history, providing a solid basis for considering the accepted perspective of art historians as problematic in that it produces an incomplete, if not entirely misleading, representation of the artist's work and the entire period between the fin-de-siècle and before World War I in Russia.

Mikhail Larionov's Artistic Persona: The Contemporary Viewpoint

British art historian Anthony Parton authored the first English-language academic research on Mikhail Larionov's legacy in 1993, entitled *Mikhail Larionov and The Russian Avant-Garde*. Parton draws attention to the essential problem in the study of Russian modernism: the complex ambivalence of the Russian Avant-garde, or, to be more precise, its debt to the artistic discourse of European modernism on the one hand and to native Russian and Eastern traditions on the other. Parton concentrates on several fundamental problems in the study of Russian modernism in general and Larionov's work

⁸Jane Ashton Sharp, *Russian Modernism Between East and West: Natalya Goncharova and The Moscow Avant-Garde* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.

in particular. The first problem is the complexity of the Russian Avant-garde's artistic grounds, particularly its connections with the artistic discourse of European modernism coupled with Larionov's manifest rejection of those connections, and his active propaganda for the native Russian and Eastern (or rather Asian) aesthetic and cultural legacy. Parton presents a thorough investigation of Larionov's stylistic development and points to an array of circumstances that allowed for the development of Larionov's artistic practice. He also describes Larionov's activity as that of a ground-breaking strategist within the Russian art scene and his involvement in other activities aside from painting, paying specific attention to the artist's self-marketing and to his activities as a show curator. He particularly studies Larionov's organization of contemporary European and Russian art exhibitions, including icons, *lubki*, and other folk art.

Parton's work also addresses the issue of chronology—a problem that is gradually becoming a moot point in the history of Russian Avant-garde and Larionov's oeuvre in particular. For decades, the chronology of Russian Avant-garde art and specifically the problems of influence in their works has been the subject of numerous art historical debates. *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* provides an extensive and persuasive compilation of primary research that challenges the established artistic chronology for one of the central figures of early Russian Avant-garde.

However, Parton's attempt to confront the ever-shaky subject of the chronological order in Larionov's oeuvre consumed his attention at the expense of a clear definition of Larionov's body of work. Although Parton appears to limit his investigation to sources outside of Russia (particularly the Tret'yakovskaya Gallery and the Russkij Hudozhestvennyy Museum archives in Moscow were disregarded)—his research was based

on the archives from the National Art Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Larionov's personal collection, some of the contemporaneous newspaper documents, and private archives in Paris and London—his work was a breakthrough on the subject. Up to the present, Parton's *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-garde* remains a grand compilation of historical materials, an important contribution to the history of the early Russian Avant-garde, and a cornerstone of Western academic research on Larionov's oeuvre.

More recently, the prominent Russian art historian Gleb Pospelov has explored Larionov's references to the past and present folk art of Russia. According to Pospelov, Larionov's intentional muddling of time, space, and culture substantiate Mikhail Bakhtin's inversion theory.⁹ The several mediums within Larionov's exhibitions, including antiquated broadsheets, signboards, and other forms of urban folklore art, are shown in Pospelov's work to challenge the accepted cultural hierarchy. In his analysis, Pospelov covers street artists' puppet theater, traversing the borders set between an artist and his biography or between the viewing audience and the artist himself. Pospelov's piece on primitivism in the avant-garde posits a juxtaposition of professional, amateur, and popular-audience Russian high art, explaining the symbiosis of primitivism and Russian sign-painting tradition.¹⁰ Pospelov, however, does not go so far as to dissect codes in primitivist avant-gardism, nor is he involved in the sociopolitical dialogue which informs Larionov and his followers' interests in contemporary Russian popular culture. More specifically, Pospelov centers his discussion on what he calls Larionov's *lowering*

⁹ Gleb Pospelov, *Bubnovyj Valet: Gorodskoj Folklor i Primitivism v Iskusstve Russkogo Avangarda* [Urban Folklore and Primitivism in Russian Avant-garde Art] (Moscow: Sovetskij Hudozhnik, 1990), 36.

¹⁰Pospelov, 117.

modes, which mediate the ideas and symbols for the audience in a certain exhibition or for a particular mode of presentation.¹¹ Given that the non-painting practice of Larionov's oeuvre presents such a rich illustration of the use of lowering, as well as carries different references to urban folk art, it is remarkable that in his study Pospelov never seeks to extend the task beyond the painting medium. Pospelov also provides a detailed analysis of over seven hundred works by Larionov and his closest group of colleagues, tracing the developmental history of Russian Neoprimitivism during the group's most active years. The author records the artist's behavior with great detail, but is not particularly concerned with drawing any sort of conclusions from that aspect of Larionov's legacy.¹²

In 2006 Jane Ashton Sharp presented an important contribution to pre-war period research on the history of Russian Avant-garde. In her book *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natalya Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* she provides a deep and thorough analysis of the attempt of avant-garde artists, particularly Natalya Goncharova and her colleagues, to regain Russia's cultural heritage of the East. Sharp presents an exhaustive study of the phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde in the political and historical context of Russia prior to WWI. In doing so, she supplies a detailed analysis of pre-war Moscow's artistic concentration on the problems of self-representation, regarding them as an outcome of Russia's ambivalence toward its cultural legacies from the East and the West. Sharp attributes the leading role to Goncharova in nearly all the projects, both as a spokesperson and a painter. According to Sharp, "her paintings, and not Larionov's (nor Kazimir Malevich's), were promoted and received in

¹¹Ibid., 36.

¹²Ibid., 121.

exhibitions and public debates as the quintessence of ‘left’ avant-garde provocation. It was she who articulated most eloquently the search for a national tradition and first sought to identify the difference from the West as a significant factor in her work.”¹³ Furthermore, according to Sharp, Larionov’s coordination of exhibitions, publication of manifestos, and organizing debates on the cultural identity of contemporary art were often preceded by and responded to Goncharova’s progress as an artist. However, my reading of both primary and secondary texts leads me to believe that, contrary to Sharp’s assertion, Larionov spearheaded the artistic innovation in the period of 1910-1914, and not Goncharova. That said, Sharp’s interpretation of the historical material can in no way be rejected or even properly challenged given the uncertainty concerning the Russian avant-garde artists’ chronology of work. And one also has to reckon with the fact that Larionov promoted Goncharova over himself at every opportunity. Due to this tendency of Larionov to subordinate his work to Goncharova’s, and even to attribute his own work to her, it is not surprising that Sharp would view Goncharova as the more important innovator of the two.

In addition to Parton, Pospelov, and Sharp’s key writings on Larionov, several other authors have also provided useful analyses. For example, Dmitry Sarabyanov has authored extensive research and multiple publications on the legacy of the Russian avant-garde, particularly on the connections between the art of Larionov’s 1910 *Knave of Diamonds* show and the foreign masters. Sarabyanov has asserted that the group members and international artists exchanged ideas and influenced one another

¹³Sharp, 1.

mutually.¹⁴ Faina Balakhovskaya's publications have developed an insightful narrative on the social aspects of the group's history, concentrating on notions of hierarchy among the group members as a source for understanding how certain styles for which the group was known were developed more fully than others.¹⁵ The writings of Jean Claude Marcade present the comparative analysis of the fauvist, neo-primitivist, and Cezannesque works of the Russian Cezannists (another name for the Knave of Diamonds group) along with the works of the European Fauvists and Expressionists.¹⁶

In the main, the researchers who deal most extensively with Larionov comprise paragons of the field, and the territory they cover is richly explored and richly excavated. Because Larionov was successful in attributing his own work, and the works he coauthored with Goncharova, to Goncharova, Jane Sharp posits that Larionov's projects derived from Goncharova's art practice. Yet ironically, she perfectly chronicles the historical quandary of self-representation in the early Russian Avant-garde. Pospelov traces the influence of folk art and regional influence in the paintings of Larionov and his colleagues and considers the mediation between the painter and the artist through the *priemy snizheniya* [lowering modes]. Parton focuses on the chronology of the era by collating historical records, but, in my opinion, succeeds more notably when he highlights the less-recognized works of Larionov, apart from his paintings, and plots the European and Asian antecedents of the movement and of Larionov's work in particular. Sarabyanov and Balakhovskaya consider the history of the early Russian avant-garde

¹⁴Pospelov, 37.

¹⁵Pospelov, 39.

¹⁶Pospelov 39.

artists' social circles and international influences, just as Marcade places their exhibitions alongside their European contemporaries. Larionov's adherents and interested parties have generally ignored his most innovative contributions to the artworld, however, by focusing on the development of the movement, the Knave of Diamonds group as a social and artistic circle, the antecedent influences on the movement, and the confounding (and often insurmountable) blurring of dates. Concentrating on these more publicity-bound and celebrity-enhanced subjects, they ignore what possibly was once a public event: that Mikhail Larionov's loquacious and challenging non-canvas practices were his most substantive contribution to his era.

II. The Cradle of Russian Modernism

“...authentic Russian art ...began around the [eighteen] fifties.”¹⁷

The art historical discussion of Russian modernism typically begins and ends with the birth and death of the Russian avant-garde. This phenomenon in the history of Russian art, however, was the culmination of a cultural revolution that began with the first radical movements of the 1850s. Thus the career of an artist whose activities fall into the period between the fin-de-siecle and before WWI in Russia necessitates a background on the earlier decades in the history of Russian art.¹⁸

The St. Petersburg Royal Academy of Fine Arts

Up until the 1850s the Russian school of easel painting (as opposed to the Moscow and provincial schools of icon painting) was concentrated in the St. Petersburg Royal Academy of Fine Arts—the elitist, rigid, and bureaucratic system that had patronized but also entirely controlled artistic life in Russia since the moment it was founded by Empress Elizabeth in 1757.¹⁹ The Academy represented and promoted Russian Academism, the style which was derived from Western Neoclassicism and induced by the introduction of German Romanticism (the Nazarenes, in particular) early

¹⁷*Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, 1902-1934. Bowlton, John E., ed., Thames and Hudson, 1988; 19.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

in the 19th century.²⁰ The Close adherence to the rigid canons of classical antiquity was the only artistic practice that Academy permitted in early 19th century Russia. By the 1850s, however, the Academy began to lose its authority as a result of several new social movements which were exercising a vast influence on the country's cultural development. The artistic societies, particularly *Wanderers* and *Mir Iskusstva*, and the alternative to the Royal Academy art educational institutions were developing a strong voice within the country, most of which was concentrated in Moscow. Consequently, although the St. Petersburg Academy art milieu was still considered the center of art in Russia up until the end of the nineteenth century, a distinct movement opposed to their ideas arose in the country at the turn of the twentieth century. Artistic experiments flourished in Moscow art circles, rapidly marginalizing the practice of rigid emulation of neo-classicist style, which had been intrinsic to artistic practice in St. Petersburg and had monopolized the Russian art world since the end of the eighteenth century. The Moscow art world emerged as a center for a nationalist movement that laid the foundations for the ensuing rediscovery of the national cultural heritage. Moscow's newfound status in the Russian art world was further formalized upon the formation of the Moscow College of Painting and Sculpture. By the time Larionov entered the School, the institution was renowned for its associations with the *Wanderers'* Realism, and Mikhail Vrubel's work, whose art practice was an inspiration to the emergence of avant-garde practices in Russia, specifically Larionov's Neoprimitivism style.

²⁰Bowlit 26.

The Slavophiles. Chernyshevsky. The First Secession: The Wanderers

Another source upon Larionov drew his inspiration was the Slavophiles' cultural movement. The Slavophiles' movement presented a major force in shaping Russian cultural life of the nineteenth century. The movement developed in Russia as a social expression denouncing Western (more specifically, German) culture in response to Catherine the Great and Peter the Great's attempts to westernize Russian culture. The movement cannot be characterized as leaning particularly left or right in the political spectrum; its proponents asserted that progressive political ideas such as democracy were intrinsic to the Russian experience (which they believed was based on democratic medieval Russia), but also considered the centuries' old tradition of the Czar's autocracy to be quintessential to Russian nature.²¹ Thus the Slavophiles believed socialism was an utterly foreign concept. The intrinsically Russian "soul mysticism" was preferred over Western rationalism.²² Aside from their political views, the Slavophiles were determined to protect what they believed were unique Russian traditions and culture.²³

The doctrines of the Slavophiles had a deep impact on many aspects of Russian cultural development. Russian philosopher, writer, and political activist Nicolai Chernyshevsky's dissertation, *On the Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, was published

²¹Bowl, xxi.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

in 1855.²⁴ He presented his view of literature with regard to the concurrent problems of art—the nature of the beautiful and of artistic invention, and the quality of art’s intermingling relations with nature and society. Chernyshevsky’s work effectively established a new thought on aesthetics with regard to the contemporary changes of the social paradigm in Europe and Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century.²⁵ According to Chernyshevsky, the overarching principle of the field of aesthetics was a “respect for life,” or more specifically, a realistic approach in one’s judgment of facts and notions. In this critical light and through his exegesis of the Hegelian understanding of aesthetics, Chernyshevsky analyzed the content and the meaning of the fundamental aesthetic categories: the beautiful, the sublime, the comic, and the tragic.²⁶ His work held significant sway over young Russian artists’ views and precipitated the establishment of a new artistic consciousness, centered on the idea that “the object is beautiful when it displays life in itself or resembles it.”²⁷

Although with a delay due to censorship, the dissertation still found its way to the Russian art world. In 1863, having integrated Chernyshevsky’s ideas into their artistic ideology, the secession of the fourteen Royal Academy of Fine Arts students proclaimed that art should be accessible to common folk of Russia.¹¹ Around 1870, most of the fourteen protesters formed the *Society of Wandering Exhibitions*, known as *The*

²⁴Nikolai Chernyshevsky, “Esteticheskiye otnosheniya iskusstva k deystvitelnosti” [Aesthetic Relations of Art to Life] in *N.G. Chernyshevsky. Sobranie Sochinenij v Pjati Tomah*. (Moscow, Pravda, 1955), 108.

²⁵Ibid., 109.

²⁶Ibid., 125.

²⁷Bowl, 28.

Wanderers. The artists put their ideas into practice by organizing traveling exhibitions throughout the Russian countryside. This model of communication with the viewer can be counted as the starting point in the development of modern Russian art. The *Wanderers* founded a new artistic code that was based on social and political critique, as opposed to pure aestheticism. Chernyshevsky's ideas were emphasized in their works through accents on the subject matter, and like their contemporaries Feodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev, the group members intended to make their art useful to society and by rejecting the "art for art's sake" philosophy pivotal to the established academic tradition.²⁸

The emergence of the *Wanderers* on the Russian art scene represents the historically significant turn in Russian art practice to purely Russian themes. In terms of artistic connections and the exchange of ideas, the *Wanderers* were deliberately isolated from the West (perhaps this is why until quite recently, they were only known in Western art history through Clement Greenberg's vigorous criticism).²⁹ Along with their monopolization of the Russian artworld of the second half of the nineteenth century, this deliberate withdrawal from the contemporary Western artistic discourse had palpable effect on the development of art in Russia. Their domination of the Russian art scene was so widespread and solid that Western tendencies in art of the time, such as French Impressionism, were not recognized in Russia until the late 1880s. Such a situation is not

²⁸Camilla Gray, *Russian Experiment in Art* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2002): 11.

²⁹Clement Greenberg made an extensive contribution to the appearance of the *Wanderers* on the Western art map, particularly through his bitter criticism of Ilya Repin's works, in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" of 1939, first published in *Partisan Review*. Since then, the *Wanderers* (a.k.a. the *Itinerants*) were long considered to be the "fathers" of Social Realism by Western art historians. Moreover, it is at least in part through the *Wanderers'* oeuvre that Clement Greenberg corroborated the idea of artistic freedom in the western cultural hemisphere. Although utterly erroneous (at least until he corrected himself two decades later, in 1960 in *Art & Culture*), his comments on Ilya Repin's work nonetheless ensured the attention of the Western art world to the works of the *Wanderers*.

a departure from the European norm of the time, however the “Russian case” was to a great extent conditioned by the intellectual nationalist activities of the *Wanderers*.

Although, both in private and on many occasions of the public disputes, Larionov was highly critical of many aspects of the *Wanderers*’ art praxis—the painting techniques, the subject matter, the narrative qualities of the works, and even their art persona social positioning—he none the less was indebted to them in many ways. Specifically, his blatant nationalist ideology (arguably nothing more than an aggressive marketing tool in Larionov’s case), takes roots in the *Wanderers*’ sincere nationalistic activities.

The *Wanderers*’ legacy in the history of Russian art is hard to overestimate, even though it had left a not exclusively positive impact on the development of Russian artworld. It is the group’s practice that represents the very beginning of the modernist period in Russian art—through their rejection of current artistic conventions and their emphasis of the conceptual value of the art work over its aesthetic qualities the artists introduced an alternative approach to art production in Russia. Moreover, their secession from the conservative academic establishment, the artists presented a new, more personal, more dynamic model of relationship between an artist and society. These progressive modifications paved the way for multiple new artistic groups to emerge in the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, resulting in an active and competitive atmosphere in the Russian art world.

Mir Iskusstva

Despite the revolutionary actions of the first *Wanderers* and the considerable changes that they brought to the Russian art scene, the evaluation of their artistic approach remains problematic. If the decline of the painting skill in the West can to a great extent be attributed to the invention of the photography and the subsequent devaluation of the painterly quality in art practice, the demise of Russian easel painting happens particularly through the Wanderers' rigid insistence that the value of painting was limited to the social purpose it served; that is, to their neglect for the inherent aesthetic value of painting: "After the crude propaganda style of the men of the sixties, a movement of intellectual nationalism arose which valued a poster-style of expression: in technique an intellectual anonymity was sought. Even the great talent of Repin was diluted in this dead atmosphere; the lack of artistic intensity gave to his work a characterless form."³⁰ It was, in fact, not until the *Mir Iskusstva* [*World of Art*] artistic society emerged on the Russian art scene that the painting skill in Russia came to its renewal.

There were two well-established and distinct artistic scenes—Moscow's and St. Petersburg's—that held sway over Russian art life at the beginning of the twentieth century. That of St. Petersburg in turn split into two art scenes: one was represented by The Imperial Academy of Art, the other one by the *Mir Iskusstva* [*The World of Art*] society and their sympathizers, attracted by the war declared by the society on the Imperial Academy and the Wanderers alike. While the Academy embodied the purely

³⁰Mikhail Vrubel on Ilya Repin, cited in Gray, 15.

conservative artistic tradition, *Mir Iskusstva* took an ambivalent position where the deep conservatism of their oeuvre was intermingling with innovative approaches in the field of exhibition practices and art promotional techniques. The Moscow art world was comprised of numerous flamboyant and dynamic artistic groups that emerged and dissolved in rapid succession, each with fundamentally unique artistic views, programs, and agendas, but united by their artistic thirst for innovation, bold ambitions, and eagerness to gain the status of progressive and renowned artists. The two art worlds did interact, but retained their distinct characteristics that both separately and synergistically impacted the development of art in Russia. The *Mir Iskusstva* provided a bridge between the two art worlds, thus spreading the progressive art tendencies from Moscow to St. Petersburg, and bringing the practice of art historical analysis and connections with the West to Moscow.

The members of the *Mir Iskusstva* artistic society were endued, to an extent, with the Imperial Academy of Art's aesthetic viewpoint and projected a distinctly West-oriented attitude in their education and ideology. They promoted artistic freedom from reality as a form of critical response and opposition to the emerging tendency among many Wanderers-like artists to focus on social issues. Alexander Benois, one of the *Mir Iskusstva* society's founders, along with his colleagues, viewed modern industrial society as aesthetically impoverished and unworthy of artistic attention. The society members propagated the perspective opposite to the Wanderers' dogmas, postulating that "reality deserves artistic attention only when reality is art itself."³¹ Seeking to develop this kind of reality, they promoted appreciation, understanding, and conservation of art of previous

³¹Velemir Khlebnikov, "Silver Age Silhouette," in *Selected Works* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 1998). <http://www.silverage.ru/main.html> , accessed October 11, 2010.

epochs, particularly traditional folk art, Rococo, Baroque, Classicism, and elements of “mystic exaltation” found in Romanticism.³²

Around 1908, *Mir Iskusstva* artists began contributing to Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* campaign, which at the time was operating in Paris’ Theatre Mogador, and later in Monte Carlo. Two central figures of the society—Leon Bakst and Alexander Benois—fundamentally transformed theatrical design with their ground-breaking decor for *Ballets Russes*’ performances of *Cleopatra* (1909), *Carnival* (1910), and *Petrushka* (1911), among others. Their far-reaching influence on stage design, in one form or another, is a forerunner of the stage design experiments that appeared later in works of Mikhail Larionov.

The exhibition practices of the *Mir Iskusstva* deserve attention as a thing in itself. Their shows impacted the history and development of art in Russia by fostering and enriching the exchange of ideas between domestic and international artists. *Mir Iskusstva*’s first exhibition also included Western contemporaries such as Degas and Monet. The 1906 *Mir Iskusstva*’s exhibition, featured Alexei von Jawlenski, Pavel Kuznetsov (the *Blue Rose* group’s leader), Mikhail Larionov, and was perhaps the most prominent exhibition that initiated multiple connections and artistic projects between the artists in Russia. The series of *Mir Iskusstva* shows demonstrated a solid practice of art exhibiting independent from the Royal Academy patronage without having to marginalize the exhibition practices to the outskirts of the country. Their practices instigated an incredible boom in Russian art exhibitions and the formation of groups

³²Khlebnikov.

(often with artistic agendas certainly unexpected for the *Mir Iskusstva*) that spanned from 1910 to 1920.

Mir Iskusstva's exhibition practices brought together the artists that took part in the *Blue Rose* and *The Golden Fleece* shows in 1908 and 1909. The exhibitions were the first Russian shows to demonstrate the Russian experiment with the post-nineteenth century Western painting techniques and methods.³³ The presenting artists combined the aesthetics of Western masters such as Matisse, Gauguin, and Bonnard with the flamboyance and decorative styles of Oriental art, and the slow rhythmic visual expressions of Eastern philosophy with the “high mysticism” of Russian iconography and the aesthetics of Russian *lubok*.³⁴ It is worth a notice that at the above-mentioned shows, the works by the young Russian artists (Larionov was among those exhibiting) were exhibited along with the works by the contemporary Western artists, including, for example, George Braque's pre-Cubist works *La Grand Nu* (1908) and *Still Life*. *Mir Iskusstva* practices impacted the art world of Russia at the time, making explicit the conservative views in of some art circles (including their own) as well as the progressive and dynamic views of the others.

Through activity on several levels—art journal publishing, exhibition activities, art criticism (which was established effectively for the first time in Russia by the society leader, Alexandre Benois), theatrical design, to name a few—*Mir Iskusstva* justly attained a reputable position in the Russian art world. Many of the contextual aspects of the Russian art world were deeply influenced by the group's activities. Their art journals and

³³Khlebnikov.

³⁴*Gleb Pospelov*, “The Knave of Diamonds” in *The Knave of Diamonds in the Russian Avant-Garde* (Palace Editions, St. Petersburg, 2004), 9.

the critical writings of Alexandre Benois presented to young Russian artists an example of rich and well-structured although often biased and conservative work of art criticism on both domestic and foreign art tendencies, and contributed to the young Russian artists' education and understanding of such practice.

One of the most consequential products of the *Mir Iskusstva* activities was their successful propagandizing of the practice of private art collecting among the wealthy and the upper middle class in Russia. It is due to the efforts of those who associated with *Mir Iskusstva*, for example Serge Diaghilev, that art collecting became a requisite life style attribute among the wealthy (especially the first-generation wealthy) citizens who strove to situate themselves as well-educated and significant members of Russian society.³⁵ This practice of collecting art became an element indispensable to the development of the Russian art world during the period between 1900 and the beginning of WWI, and not only owing to the evolving practice of financial support for the independent artists in Russia. The newly emerged practice of art patronage was critical due to the fact that it was through the private art collections that many young Moscow artists had direct experience of the most recent, most innovative examples of the Western art practice. In other words, in the first two decades of the twentieth century it was the means from private sources that served as the vehicle of the art concepts' rapid invasion from the contemporary Western art worlds into that of Russia.

³⁵Gray, 67.

The Connoisseurs

The *Mamontov's Circle* (also known as the *Abramtsevo Colony*) represents the embodiment of the first decade of modernism in Russia. The colony comprised of artists, composers, writers, philosophers, architects, poets, archaeologists, and art historians who resided in Mamontov's Abramtsevo estate near Moscow epitomizes the prominent case when patriotic enthusiasm and effort for Russia's cultural advancement combined with an immense wealth of one person presented an alternative to the all-powerful St. Petersburg Academy's patronage (less its heavy bureaucratic system and emulation practices). The colony was brought together in 1871 by Savva Mamontov, a Russian railroad magnate who gathered together the most progressive figures of the time at his estate. Himself a sculptor, singer, stage director and dramaturge, for many years Mamontov, "the inspiration of three consecutive generations of painters," actively supported many intellectuals, artists, composers, and philosophers.³⁶ Like many among the Slavophiles, the members of Mamontov's circle promoted the idea that Russia had to have its own social and cultural habits. Like the *Wanderers*, many of the society members passionately refuted the idea of "art for art's sake," which was understood as the fundamental concept of the current art practice in the St. Petersburg Royal Academy of Art. The group formed a new art environment in Russia, situated in Moscow, that was an alternative to the elitist and West-oriented art world of St. Petersburg. The Moscow art world emerged as a center for a nationalist movement that laid the foundations for the ensuing rediscovery of the national cultural heritage and the rejection of neo-classicism, which had dominated in Russia since the end of the eighteenth century.

³⁶Gray, 11.

Apart from Savva Mamontov, there was Pavel Tretyakov, who started acquiring the *Wanderers'* paintings in early 1870s, and essentially saved these artists from poverty by buying their paintings for three consecutive decades. Andrea Schemshurin, who also supported the young Moscow artists provided support not only for the practice of painting, but, along with Bakrushin, for theatrical arts and music. Others provided support for the publication of many educational, scientific and cultural works central to the modern movement in the country.

It would be hard to over-stress the role of the Russian wealthy citizens' in the turn toward the fine arts. Their activities provided the necessary conditions for the developmental transition in Russian art practice, from the rigid, backward-looking and emulative to the prolific and the avant-garde. The pivotal aspect here is that during the first decade of the twentieth century, the young Moscow artists began their systematic education on the contemporary Western art through the sources of private art collections. Particularly significant is their acquaintance with the most innovative works of art produced in Paris, which were introduced to them through the exhibitions of the remarkable art collections of Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin. Morozov's French art collection reflected his preference for Post-Impressionism, works of Nabis and Paul Gauguin. Sergei Schukin's collection was formed with works by Cezanne and Van Gogh, over thirty-five works by Matisse, and fifty paintings by Pablo Picasso, including important Cubist works. The two men's practice of collecting the Western avant-garde art and the open door policy for the Moscow artists willing to see the merchants' international art collections presents an indispensable contribution to the formation of vital conditions in the Moscow art world. The *maecenates'* collections projected immense

influence on the education and artistic development of future Russian Avant-garde artists. Taking a close look at the chronological development of their collections makes clear how fast the innovations from Paris were penetrating the Russian art milieu through these sources. For example, soon after the initial appearance of these collections in Russia, during *The Golden Fleece* exhibitions of 1908 and 1909 the Russian artists already demonstrated the integration the language of Fauvism into their works. As with other artists, the imported works provided young Larionov with a rare opportunity to become acquainted with the latest examples of innovative Western art, and this experience, along with his previous experience of contemporary French art in Paris in 1906, triggered an immensely productive period of artistic experimentation for Larionov. The artist's works from this period testify to the effect of canvases by Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh, and others on the young Moscow artist; even the most superficial acquaintance with Larionov's body of work from this time period establishes that his experiences of these art collections were vital to the formation of Larionov's later work.

Private patronage was crucial for sustaining the innovative art practice, allowing it to strengthen and develop the new art environment independent of St. Petersburg's art milieu and to subsequently direct the course of modern art in Russia. This phenomenon is also remarkable as it repeatedly reflects the differences between the systems of transport of artistic ideas in the Western artworld and that of Russia. In this aspect, the latter often does not mirror the dynamics of modernist art practice of the former, where direct artistic contacts played a decisive role in the spread of progressive art practices.³⁷ For example, the case of conceptual spread of Cubism in Russia can be almost exclusively attributed to

³⁷Robert Jensen, "Velocity: Cubism, Nationalism, and Transnationalism," (English version unpublished, 2008): 16-17.

the connoisseur practice of Schukin. Many of the works by Picasso, as for example *The Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, were purchased and delivered to Moscow immediately upon their completion.³⁸ This practice of immediate acquisitions and delivery of Picasso's works (which essentially assured that the Russian audience would experience these works not after but before the French audience) and the subsequent immediate demonstration of the works to the young artists in Moscow contributes to the difference in the dynamics of the artistic exchange of ideas between Moscow and, for example, Paris, and possibly offers another answer to the question of the extremely rapid spread of Cubism outside of France.³⁹ Although there is historical evidence for the pro-Cubist and Cubist works being present at few artist-run exhibitions (including the 1909 *Blue Rose*, *The Golden Fleece* and the 1910-1911 *The Knave of Diamonds* show, organized by Larionov, which held works by Gleizes, Metzinger, Le Fauconnier, Leger, and Lhote⁴⁰) in Moscow of 1908-9, it is likely an indication of the artists' preceding awareness of the Cubist works through Schukin's collection (already in 1908, the Schukin's collection contained quite radical pieces by Picasso from his early stage of Cubism) rather than of the artists' initial encounter with Cubism.

³⁸From Fall 2007 seminar on Cubism by Rob Jensen, Associate Prof., College of Fine Arts, University of Kentucky.

³⁹Jensen, "Velocity: Cubism, Nationalism, and Transnationalism," (English version unpublished, 2008): 16-17.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 17.

Mikhail Larionov: The Beginning Years

Mikhail Larionov arrived to Moscow at the age of twelve as a student of the Voskresensky School. In 1898, Larionov entered the ten-year long study course at the Moscow School of Art, Sculpture, and Architecture.⁴¹ Larionov attempted a multiplicity of stylistic and conceptual approaches to drawing and painting throughout his career, while clearly influenced by Russian national and cultural heritage as well as the Western schools of painting. His first use of synthetic approaches in painting appeared in the period of 1898 to roughly 1902. Larionov was beyond prolific during these years, producing over four hundred drawings, watercolor illustrations for *The Arabian Nights*, five hundred miscellaneous sketches, decorated boards, a series of sculptures, and a few full-scale paintings.⁴² The works reflected Larionov's direct engagement with many contemporary French artists and reverberated his Moscow Art School training in their style, subject, and manner of execution (Figure II.1). It is obvious in these works that Konstantin Korovin, regarded as one of the finest masters of easel painting and one of the best teachers in the history of the Moscow School of Drawing, Painting and Architecture, had a hand in Larionov's training and education as a painter. The series of works also bears a distinct resemblance to the works of Toulouse-Lautrec, with their empty backgrounds, the sketchy appearance of figures, as well as the subject matter of his works (the street women of Moscow). Nonetheless, Larionov went beyond the practice of emulating foreign masters, so intrinsic to a Russian art practitioner of the time. The works depict even more rigid handling of color and intentionally diminished artistic skill, and

⁴¹Parton, 6.

⁴²Ibid., 4.

generally appear much more simplified than those of the French masters of the time (Figure II.2).

With his progress in the Moscow School, Larionov almost fully transitions away from an emphasis on drawing and sketches in favor of painting. During the period from 1902 to 1906, Larionov earned a reputation as the “finest Russian Impressionist.”⁴³ The series of canvases titled *The Garden* and *The Coal Shed* present fine examples of the young artist’s search for valid artistic expression with references to the works of Impressionists (Figure II.3). Nonetheless, his oeuvre from the time period already does not imply stylistic homogeneity, as some of the works resemble more the Post-Impressionist works, particularly like those of Vincent van Gogh, with longer strokes and red contrasting outlines (contours) of objects (Figure II.4).⁴⁴

By 1904 his notorious image of a rebel-artist at the School (in 1902 Larionov was expelled from the School and a year after readmitted; the two facts were extensively adorned by fantasy tales on how Prince Lvov, the Art School director, begged Larionov to come back), his active participation in Moscow’s art shows, his prolific art practice and his close friendships with his teacher Kostantin Korovin and with the brilliant art promoter Sergey Diaghilev had brought him to the attention of art supporters.⁴⁵ It is during this time period that Larionov acquired his first art patron, the Russian art collector Troyanovsky, who becomes committed to Larionov for the next decade (during the first five years Troyanovksy purchased from Larionov over forty canvases, numerous pastels

⁴³Gray, 102.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Parton, 16.

and watercolor illustrations for *The Arabian Nights*; his overall contribution to patronage of Larionov's art practice amounts to over one hundred acquisitions).⁴⁶

This period in Larionov's career was also acknowledged by leading Russian art critics; particularly Igor Grabar' and later Ivan Punin, who claimed this period in the artist's career to be a significant contribution to the evolution of Russian modernism.⁴⁷

Punin carefully traced the influences of western art on Larionov's artistic practice in that period. He particularly indicated that Larionov was heavily influenced by an exhibition of French art, organized by the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg in 1900, and by the collection of Sergei Schukin, who first brought Monet's works to Russia in 1897.

Neoprimitivism

The first, most significant case of Larionov's case of experiencing Western art came when in 1906, his friendship and collaboration with Diaghilev enabled Larionov to visit France and to participate in the Russian section of the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris in 1906. At the *Salon* Larionov presented six works, mainly from his impressionistic series. Although during the stay in Paris Larionov did not assert himself as a grand art innovator, the trip prompted him to substantially revise his own work, which is made explicit upon examining his works from the years immediately following his visit to Paris. Having spent a month in France mostly visiting multiple exhibitions and shows in Paris, including Paul Gauguin's retrospective show, Larionov later synthesized his experiences into a new style—Neoprimitivism—which amalgamated Gauguin's and other French

⁴⁶Parton, 5.

⁴⁷Parton, 6.

artists' ideas of Primitivism in art with elements of Russian Orthodox icon painting, and the aesthetics of Russian urban folklore. By 1910, Larionov's artistic progress was also profoundly influenced by the artistic developments of the West that were regularly added to Moscow art connoisseurs' collections from France, Italy, and Germany almost instantly after their production.⁴⁸

Larionov's Neoprimitivism dominated the Russian avant-garde art between 1908 and 1912, a period that witnessed the "sudden appearance of wooden spoons instead of aesthetes' orchids."⁴⁹ The artist reworked and, to a certain extent, stressed Fauvist elements, going even further in introducing the *naïve* approach in their works – in some cases more consciously than was done in the original Fauvist works. Larionov's immediate follower, Goncharova, also provided an immense contribution to the development of the new style, demonstrating the abundance of the formal language of the style. Larionov's Neoprimitivist works present a more detached, insightful, and logical form of expression of the polemics of the style (Figure II.5), whereas Goncharova's works are truly outstanding in her ability to control enormously large compositions and to appreciate the non-naturalistic, strictly two-dimensional designs of the Russian Byzantine icon painting (Figure II.6).⁵⁰ Along with integration of national motifs in their works, both artists demonstrated a disproportionate concentration on inverted perspective, flat definition of figures, distinct vulgarization and reduction of form, emphasizing the

⁴⁸This happened with many works by Matisse's, Picasso's and other masters of the West. Moreover, many Russian art connoisseurs personally commissioned works by the progressive artists of the West.

⁴⁹Bowl, John E. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory And Criticism 1902-1934* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988):xxxii.

⁵⁰George Heard Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880-1940* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 305-09.

problem of the two-dimensional quality of a painting, and contrasting outline by color rather than by line (Figure II.7). With Neoprimitivism, the works drew viewers' attention to their own culture, which Larionov achieved through the exploration of visual imagery long associated exclusively with Russian mass culture, including the popular *Lubok* prints, toys, shop signs, painted trays, fairground photographs, broadsheets, and advertisements. In many ways justly, after the "Knave of Diamonds" exhibition of 1910, Larionov (already emerging as an avant-garde leader of the contemporaneous art milieu in Russia) proclaimed his exaggerated art practice of Neoprimitivism as the first truly innovative Russian style in visual art.⁵¹

⁵¹Sharp, 134.



Figure II.1. Mikhail Larionov, *Still Life with Pears*, 1907. State Russian Museum, St.Petersburg.



Figure II.2. Mikhail Larionov, *A Woman and a Flamingo* (from *Arabian Nights* series), 1898. J.E.Rubinstein Collection, Moscow.



Figure II.3. Mikhail Larionov, *Lilac Bush in Flower*, 1905-06. State Tretyakovskaya Gallery, Moscow.



Figure II.4. Mikhail Larionov, *Fish in a Setting Sun*, 1904. State Russian Museum, St.Petersburg.

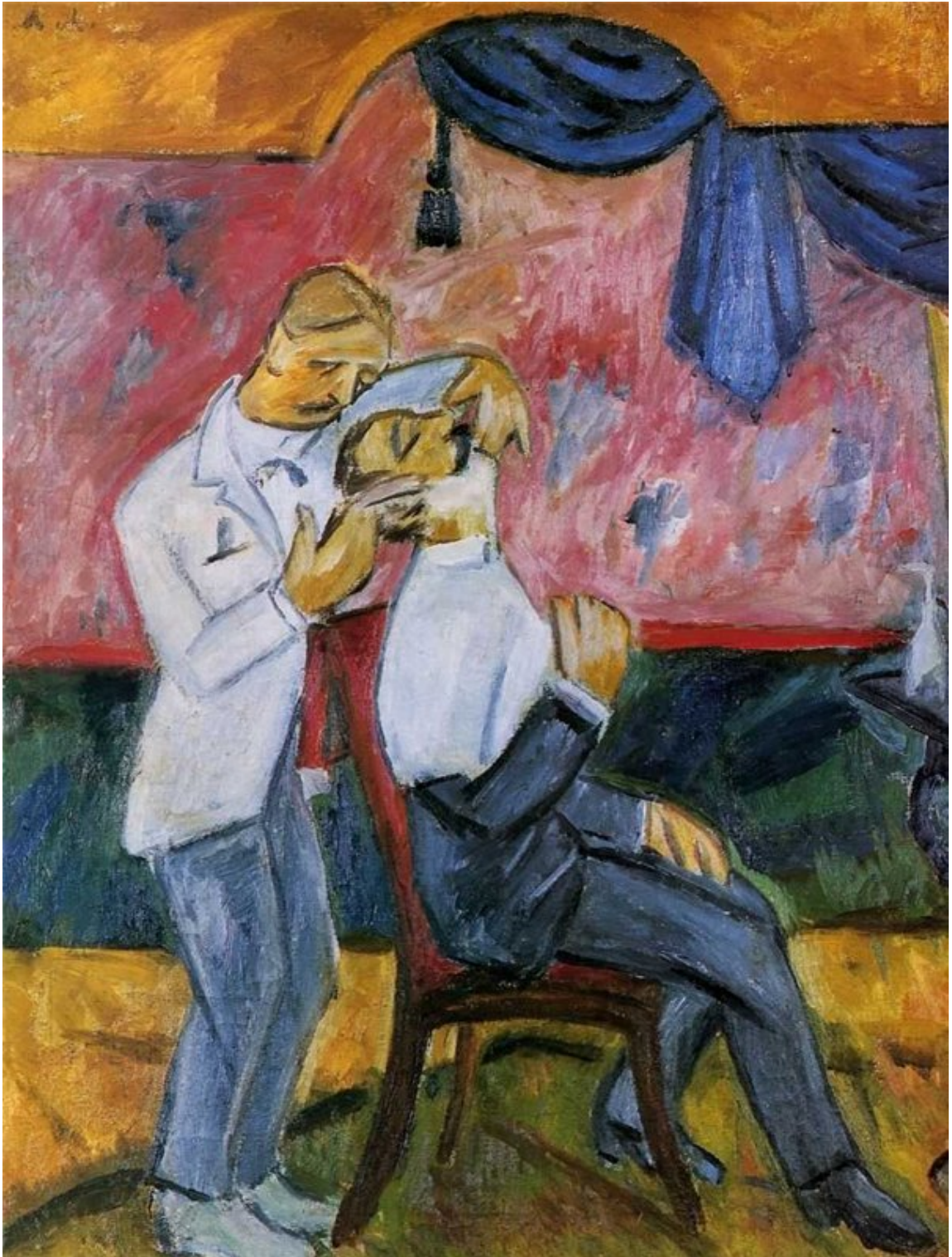


Figure II.5. Mikhail Larionov, *The Hairdresser*, 1907 (possibly 1909). State Russian Museum, St.Petersburg.



Figure II.6. Natalya Goncharova, *The Evangelists*, 1910. State Russian Museum, St.Petersburg.



Figure II.7. Mikhail Larionov, *Petite Cabaret*, 1905-08. Galerie Beyeler, Bale.

III. The Art Around Art

The Art of Art Scandal

Mikhail Larionov's first prominent appearance on the Russian art scene came through the *Knave of Diamonds* group art show in Moscow of December 10, 1910, where the artist revealed his artistic persona and drew attention to his work through a sequence of deliberately transgressive steps, the first of which was manifested in the given exhibition. Larionov's own words provide perspective on the artist's attitude, his conscious decision to challenge the audience, and the problems he faced:

'Exhibition! What is the exhibition? What are the paintings? No doubt, the paintings are great, but who understands this art? You and I do, but that's all. Do you think the public understands anything about this art, do you think they care?! No! They need the event, the noise! They need talking! But there's no exhibition if there's no public... Well, what shall we do about it?'⁵²

Freshly expelled from the Moscow College of Art and Architecture, Larionov embraced his position of outlaw in art, quickly realizing the ways of capitalizing on it, often stressing this point to an extent of grotesque. As a solution to the challenges that he faced when putting the show together, the artist presented a detailed analysis (both philosophical and strictly artistic) of the phenomenon of emergence beyond one's own social and emotional "norms," choosing to state it through the idea of illegitimacy as a

⁵²E. Inshakova "Na Grani Elitarnoj i Massovoj Kul'tur. K Osmysleniyu "Igrovogo Prostranstva" Russkogo Avangarda" [On the Verge of the Elitist and Mass Cultures. Understanding the Playground of Russian Avant-garde] in *Obsjestvennye Nauki i Sovremennost'*, Moscow, 2001, 162 - 174

central concept of the show. The condition of the taboo, when a certain limit is conceived as a non-transitory barrier in a certain cultural tradition, was used by the artist as an instance of his idea of illegitimacy. *The Knave of Diamonds* show in 1910, as well as subsequent events that he organized, were centered on the theme of *carnival*, particularly the paradoxical juxtaposition of high and low of social culture.⁵³ The carnival culture melded the normative strata of society such that the lower aspects of life, for example, human emotions, were considered more important than logic and order, where “[...] all were considered equal... a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.”⁵⁴ Hence, with regard to functionality, Larionov’s shows and public debates are perhaps best characterized as *carnivalesque*: the taboo “quality that emerges during the carnival festivities, throughout which it is allowed—and even required—to do the forbidden.”⁵⁵ It is precisely Larionov’s acts of transgression that make his art exhibiting performances so *carnivalesque*, so extraordinarily enticing, so exciting for the human mind, and it is these acts that ultimately challenged the audience’s passive role as unengaged observer.

Larionov started his *épatage* performance weeks before the show, by announcing the title of the exhibition *The Knave of Diamonds*, which followed a series of either stern or very romantic titles such as *The Union of Russian Artists* and *The Association of Traveling Artistic Exhibitions* (“Peredvizhniki”), *The Golden Fleece*, *The Scarlet Rose*, *Blue Rose*, *The Wreath* and others similar to them. Obviously, Larionov recognized that

⁵³M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 47.

⁵⁴M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

the hooligan title of “The Knave of Diamonds” would be akin to a slap in the public’s face. The excerpts from the essay “Bubnovy Valet” [“The Knave of Diamonds”] by Maximilian Voloshin, the famous Russian poet and influential 20th century Russian art critic, are worthy of attention here:

Even before its opening, the exhibition ‘The Knave of Diamonds,’ just by its name, aroused unanimous indignation among the connoisseurs of art in Moscow. Some of them even suggested that the reason for the exhibition not to be opened for so long was the governor’s prohibition (with the purpose of preventing gambling). Others were cracking jokes, punning: ‘When you are dealt a bad hand, nothing’s left but to go with diamonds [a teasing comment on the situations when a person who makes a desperate attempt to win in a card game, ignoring the fact that there are no winning cards]...’⁵⁶

How had the artist arrived at, and determined, the choice of such a peculiar title and logo for the *Knave of Diamonds*, what did it mean to Larionov and the other show organizers, and, more importantly, what were his intentions intentions and expectations here? Was that public rage that the exhibition acquired through the title and logo a desired or rather an accidental effect for the artist? Most importantly, what were the implications of such unorthodox art promotion and art branding choices?

Alexander Kuprin, one of *The Knave of Diamonds* founders, indicated that it was Larionov’s preoccupation with playing card images that led to the titling of the exhibition. “I was at Larionov and Goncharova’s place,” Kuprin recollected in his memoirs, “we were sitting and examining the playing cards with reproductions from the works of old French masters. Then Larionov took the knave of diamonds card in his

⁵⁶M. Voloshin, “Moskovskaya Khronika. Vystavki. Bubnovu Valet” in *Russkaya Khudozhestvennaya Letopis’* no. 1, (1911), 11.

hands: ‘Here, why not name our exhibition, our association ‘The Knave of Diamonds’?’”⁵⁷ Kuprin, along with Robert Falk and Vassily Rozhdestvensky, protested that the title was too provocative, outrageous and flippant. Not to be denied, Larionov argues from the history of the pictures on the cards, asserting that on the Italian cards of the Renaissance age the knave of diamonds was represented with a palette in hands and that, consequently, the knave of diamonds must be an artist. Apparently this was one of Larionov’s characteristic fabrications, “for the art’s sake,” because, in fact, there was no figure on the knave of diamonds playing cards of the Renaissance age.⁵⁸ Evidently, a scandal at any price was cajoled by the artist from the very beginning and understood as a necessary element in promotion of art.

Ilya Mashkov, another society founder, confirms that the name caused a sense of shock, astonishment, bewilderment, and suspicion among the replete and sated middle class, merchants, and nobility of Moscow.⁵⁹ The playing card motif alone would conjure up images of scandal, forbidden pleasure and street show entertainments. At that time, card games were strictly forbidden by the Moscow city governor. Moreover, given the current Russian slang, the words “knave of diamonds” immediately provoked associations with a con artist or cheater, someone who was banished from respectable society and who did not merit any trust.⁶⁰ Situating himself and his colleagues as outcasts of the society, Larionov deliberately positioned the exhibition in opposition to the kind of

⁵⁷Pospelov, 98

⁵⁸Voloshin, Maksimilian, “Moscow Chronicles. Exhibitions. ‘Bubnovyj Valet’” in *Russian Art’s Chronicle*.1991, no.1(1911), 11 (Moscow Tretyakov Gallery Archives)

⁵⁹Ibid, 11.

⁶⁰Pospelov, *Bubnovyj Valet*, 98.

artistic self-presentation that was accepted as the norm.

Already, soon after the exhibition, the impact of such successful art branding maneuver on Larionov's part was well appreciated by his colleagues. Apparently, the exhibition title was successful enough that another group member, Aristarkh Lentulov, presented his own version of the exhibition title's origin and implication of his co-authorship in "Memoirs" (1930). He wrote: "A question about the name of the exhibition took a very sharp turn, and I together with Larionov thought hard and long of a number of names until, finally, deciding to name it 'The Knave of Diamonds.' It symbolized nothing, but rather was caused by the observation that there were way too many pretentiously-sophisticated names around at that time: 'Wreath of Stefanos,' 'Blue rose,' 'Golden fleece,' etc. Therefore, we decided the worse the better, so then, actually, what could be more ridiculous than 'The Knave of Diamonds'?"⁶¹ *The Knave of Diamonds'* logo appeared for the first time on the exhibition bill of the 1910 show. The playbill was created by the artist Alexei Morgunov one day prior to the opening of the exhibition: "Morgunov made two [concentric] circles in the middle of canvas with a pair of compasses, slightly shifted the center of the circles, and then drew a knave of diamonds in each of the semicircles, one with head upwards, another one upside-down, just the way they appear on playing cards."⁶² The background was covered with a scarlet red color, and the text in black letters was written next: *Exhibition of Paintings of the Knave of Diamonds*. Walking along the street and reading this signboard, one could easily get an impression that there were not paintings there but something like an illegal gambling

⁶¹Pospelov, 98.

⁶²Ibid.

house.”⁶³ This was not lost on Moscow newspapers, who wrote that “this shameless playing card may as well serve as an emblem for the madhouse rather than an art exhibition symbol,”⁶⁴ and deduced that the upcoming show must be a “secret gambling house and not [an] art exhibition.”⁶⁵ The artists expressed no dismay over the notoriety garnered by the show. In fact, they were evidently well aware of the transgressive character of the title and the logo, and therefore it is safe to accept that they deliberately and brilliantly used these “knavish” tricks as a promotional strategy to gain publicity for the exhibition. The provocative title and logo resonated tremendously in the Moscow artworld and ensured that the show would receive public attention, regardless of the actual quality of the exhibited works.

As did the title, the logo on the poster certainly made bizarre and twisted innuendos, not only with playing cards but also with the diamond emblem that was similar to the diamond-shaped patch that was sewn on the back of Russian political convicts’ prison robes in order to caution respectable citizens upon encountering these prisoners. The artists were certainly aware of the fact that criminals and political convicts were popular subject matter for Russian black humor anecdotes of the time, and their association of the diamond-shaped symbol with a world of rebellion and crime was well established in the public mind. Predictably, upon opening the exhibition, the Knaves attracted wide attention from the Moscow press, art critics, and general public, and many interpreted the artworks through the “criminal” lens conjured by the exhibition’s title and

⁶³Pospelov, 98.

⁶⁴Pospelov, G. “. Tretyakovskaya Galereya Magazine Bubnovy Valet Special edition, February, 2005: 7.

⁶⁵Ibid

emblem. The *Russkoe Utro* newspaper reporter wrote: “Oh, yes, yes, I recognize this guy... I certainly saw him earlier this year, in spring, when the convicts were convoyed through the city. He was walking in the very front, ahead of the crowd.”⁶⁶ In fact, the reporter presented his whole exhibition review in the form of a court trial dialogue between the prosecutor and the defendant, and published his article under the title “The Diamond Trial”:

“– ‘Do you admit that in December 1910 you, together with the other young men here, presented pieces of canvas-and-paint mess for open public observation, pretending that they were paintings, and for that reason insulting people’s intelligence and aesthetic sensibility?’ – the judge asked the ‘knave’ David Burlyuk.

- ‘Yes, I admit it,’ – the defendant answered simply.

- ‘And did your conscience never hurt you for such indecent things that you committed?’ – this time the judge asked the ‘knave’ Mikhail Larionov.

- ‘Oh, yes, your honor, it did hurt us, but we just cannot help it.’” The dialogue continues in this vein.⁶⁷

Public outrage played into the hand of *The Knaves*; the intrinsic organizing principle for the show was centered on the *Knaves*’ motto, “The Worse The Better!”⁶⁸ Reporting about the exhibition with great aggravation, using every available offensive epithet toward *The Knaves*, the Moscow press probably unintentionally, but nonetheless effectively, provoked interest in the show, which attracted about five thousand viewers over the first week of the show. The scandalous reputation that was growing around *The*

⁶⁶Pospelov, 107.

⁶⁷Pospelov, 97.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Knave of Diamonds soon became an essential part of Larionov's public persona.

When the exhibition finally opened, it appeared perfectly clear that here too everything had been done to outrage the eye of the visitor. The thorniest looking geometrical angular compositions of B. Takke and R. Falk were displayed in the first hall. In the center of the middle hall an enormous canvas by Ilya Mashkov portrayed the painter himself and another group member, Peter Konchalovsky, "in such an unexpected manner that viewers couldn't even imagine what could it mean: there they were—the two naked men with enormous eyes, having on nothing but charcoal-black boxers, demonstrating splendid muscles and depicted singing a song of romance, sitting on the long divan, and with their wrestlers' weights by their feet." (Figure III.1).

The next wave of public outrage was provoked not only by the bold canvasses but, to a great extent, by the artists' approach for exhibiting the works. Paintings that were absolutely incompatible, both visually and logically, were hung immediately adjacent to one another, with no space between them, without frames, and without any concern for traits such as symmetry, straight lines or color harmony, "in a word – they were placed in such a way that one painting could easily destroy another one."⁶⁹

Although there was no such term as *installation art* at the time, Larionov's artistic approach to the arrangement of exhibition space was very close to what is currently known as such: the works melded in the viewers' eyes into a simultaneous cacophony of shocking colors, forms, and styles, created to leave one with an impression not so much from the individual works as from the overwhelming and unsettling sense of visual, emotional, and cognitive noise created by the exhibition as a whole.

⁶⁹Pospelov, 99.

Over the next three years, the group members repeatedly lived up to the public's expectation for the notoriously bold theatrics that had emerged during *The Knave of Diamonds*' first exhibition. Even the secession of Larionov and Goncharova became imbued with the *épatage* that later became a distinctive characteristic for the whole Russian avant-garde. When Larionov and Goncharova left the group, extravagant and scandalous interviews with the remaining group members appeared in many widely circulated periodicals of the Moscow press and in public discussions, where the former colleagues gratuitously exchanged insults, to the great amusement of the audiences.⁷⁰

Soon thereafter, on February 12, 1912 in the large auditorium of Moscow's Polytechnic University Museum, the newly formed *The Knave of Diamonds* group held their first artistic debate. Both present and former exhibitor of *The Knave of Diamonds* show appeared in public to openly discuss the problems of art in Russia. The debate opened with a series of talks given by the event's organizers and participants. David Burlyuk presented a talk titled "On Cubism and Other Movements in Painting," Nikolai Kulbin presented "The New Free Art as the Basis of Life," to which their appointed debate opponent Maximilian Voloshin responded. Remarkably, the audience was allowed, and even encouraged, to interrupt the speakers in order to support, contradict, or even redirect the discussion at will. Excerpts from Russian periodicals provide the detailed chronicles and rather remarkable comments of this and subsequent debates in which *The Knaves* participated, and a selection of these excerpts is presented here to provide a better sense for the debate proceedings and general public outrage with the artists' practices.

- "If one looks closely at the various lectures of these debates, one comes to the

⁷⁰Pospelov 99.

inevitable conclusion that all this is nothing more than a shameless and open exploitation of popular entertainment . . . ”⁷¹

- “By the way, the public in the main gets what it is looking for, and more often than not it is looking for scandal.”⁷²
- “The opponent speaks for about fifteen minutes. The public begins to fidget. They feel it is time to finish. A demonstrative cough begins, and continues for a few seconds. But the lecturer remains cool. After five more minutes—an unceasing stamping of feet and shouts of ‘enough’ are heard. With this accompaniment the opponent somehow finishes his speech.”⁷³
- “After Larionov’s outrageous hollering was finally interrupted, he kicked the speakers’ chair, broke it and then went down to fight with someone of the present audience who explicitly disagreed with his position.”⁷⁴
- “Larionov smashed the pulpit in anger”⁷⁵
- “The Futurist with a spoon in his jacket begins to carry on with some kind of bold garbage, complaining that the preceding opponent caused him to have an upset stomach, and directly calls him an idiot. And again—the constant cry. ‘Get out!’ ‘Enough!’ ‘Kick him in the neck!’”⁷⁶
- “Mr. Shatilov offered to his opponent, the artist Aristarkh Lentulov, a quite curious bet: If Lentulov explained the meaning of his painting “The Civil War,” then Mr. Shatilov deliberately would go to jail and stay there for the next six months.”⁷⁷
- “Those rather heavy, full of water, glasses were thrown to the next speaker’s

⁷¹ A. Sharp, “The Russian Avant-Garde and its audience” in *Modernism/Modernity*, 6:3 (1999): 91-116

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Pospelov, 113.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

head and I remember the genius comment of the policeman, who apparently was not only brave, but a well-educated person as well. ‘We should understand all this symbolically,’ he said.”⁷⁸

Through the innovative, often unjustifiably scandalous, but always undoubtedly gifted art promotional and art branding techniques, Larionov and his followers were attempting not only to shake the foundations of art, but to challenge the foundation of society. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact their bravado and scandalous tricks had on the whole Russian Avant-garde movement. Their performances provided many artists over the next decade after the first “Knaves of Diamonds” show an invaluable forum for interaction between artist and audience, and between artist and critic, in addition to attracting the attention of wider audiences through media coverage of their events and antics. The debates garnered so much popular and critical attention that they came to be seen as fundamental to the promotion of art and, accordingly, the debates were scheduled so to coincide with the openings of important avant-garde exhibitions.

The engaging participatory format of the debates compelled the general public to take an active role in the ongoing dialogue; passive indifference was hardly an option. The infusion of public shock, scandal, laughter, and irony as promotional tools in the realm of Russian high art realized the Larionov’s hopes—an enormous influx of interest on the part of the general public. Although Larionov did not articulate in written form any kind of statements at the time of the first exhibition, the deliberately engineered scandal around the show, the body of works at the exhibition and the manner of their presentation testifies to the emergence of fundamental changes in what was at the time conceived as

⁷⁸Pospelov., 115.

art (more precisely, as high art) and a shift in the strategies of art promotion in Russia.

Reaction to that first show was concentrated at least as much on the manner in which the paintings were introduced, such as the provocative art show poster and the bizarre arrangement of the works, as on the paintings themselves. The single-minded public indignation against the artists' actions was widely articulated through the media and art critics' contemporaneous writings. Those voices engendered another aspect of Larionov's legacy. His unorthodox activities and promotional techniques—the manner in which the works were exhibited, and the title and logo used as not just a means of announcement about the show but as an indispensable part of the body of works presented at the show—transformed the Russian art world and are as important to Larionov's legacy as the art he and his colleagues produced.

Yes, We are Asia and are Proud of This...⁷⁹

“Russia, like Japan, was Other, and this was a good thing.”⁸⁰

Throughout his career in Russia, but especially during the years of 1912-1913, Larionov actively promoted the idea of detachment from Western art practices and demonstrated his intolerance toward the passive followers and “emulators of the West.”⁸¹ The efforts of the artist to liberate himself from their pitiful image as imitators of Western practices and to reverse the West-oriented urban culture in Russia had been deliberated and were widely popularized by the beginning of 1912 in Russia. If one considers the

⁷⁹Alexander Shevchenko, “Neoprimitivism” in John E. Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory And Criticism 1902-1934* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988): 43-54.

⁸⁰Jane Sharp, 20.

⁸¹Ibid.

consistency with which Larionov used the easternized nationalist ideology to identify himself and his close colleagues at the Russian art milieu as pro-Asians in their praxis, it is worthwhile to ask whether this strategy promised certain advantages to his artistic career.

In February 1912, Larionov participated at the public debate “On Contemporary Art” where he effectively stole the show with equally bitter and theatrical speech performance, main subjects of which were a declaration of his and Goncharova’s dissociation from the *Knave of Diamonds* artistic group and an assertion of his position on the current state of the artworld of Moscow.⁸² Larionov announced his refusal to support the formation of the “Knave of Diamonds” artistic society, which essentially was the culmination of an internal conflict between the group members, one which had become palpable immediately after the *Knave of Diamonds* exhibition of 1910-1911. Larionov, blatantly seeking a public scandal, branded the remaining *Knave of Diamonds* members as “the lackeys of Paris” (in reference to their Cezannesque emulation practices), while David Burlyuk was awarded with the epithet of a “decadent Munich follower” (referring to Burlyuk’s connections with the Munich-based exhibition society *Der Blaue Reiter* led by Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc). On different other occasions, he blatantly disavowed the connections to Western painting tradition, and proclaimed the artists exhibiting in the *Donkey’s Tail* to be the only truly original Russian artists.⁸³ Around the same time, Larionov and Goncharova disseminated the *Donkey’s Tail* exhibition program through the press, where they further stressed that “*Donkey’s Tail* [the

⁸²Gray, 131-32.

⁸³Gray, 131-33.

works prepared for the art exhibition] derives exclusively from Russian traditions . . .”, a point that evidently was central to Larionov’s art publicity agenda at the time.⁸⁴ It was through his scandalous speeches and interviews that Larionov effectively solidified his artistic identity in Moscow art scene by clearly stating the rhetoric of solely Russian and Eastern (particularly Asian) cultural legacy behind his and his followers’ works, asserting the imminent arrival (through his and his followers works exhibition in upcoming *Donkey’s Tail* show in March of 1912) of an independent Russian school in art and claiming their deliberate breakaway from Europe.⁸⁵

A year later, on February 12, 1913, Larionov organized a public discussion titled “On East, Nationality and West,” which was a series of talks designed to further ensure the promotion of the idea of contemporary Russian art’s autonomy from the West (mainly Paris and Munich) and to demonstrate how his and other former *Donkey’s Tail* circle members’ modernist art practices stood as antithesis to western art practice, referencing the artistic discourses of the Russian folk art, Russian Byzantine icon visual imagery, and the formal languages of the visual cultures of Asia.⁸⁶ This concern of the shift in the reference point from the West to the East appeared to be the subject of central importance to Larionov’s interactions with the art world and general public.

In March of 1913, Mikhail Larionov presented yet another attempt to solidify the idea of eastern legacy in Russian art. Two shows—*The Lubok and Original Icon Painting Exhibition* and *The Target*—were organized almost solely by the artist and opened

⁸⁴“O.kh.” *Golos Moskvyy*, no.45 (24 February, 1912), The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, University Central Library archives.

⁸⁵Gray,137.

⁸⁶Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, 46.

simultaneously in the same venue, at the Artistic Salon on Bol'shaya Dmitrovka Street in Moscow. The exhibitions did not seem to have common traits, aside from the name of the show curator. One of the two, *The Lubok and Original Icon Painting Exhibition*, was a show comprised of over one hundred seventy Russian folklore *lubok* pieces from Larionov's personal collection, among which were the *Bouryat lubok*, over seventy five Japanese woodcuts, almost forty Chinese prints, and seventeen Tatar prints.⁸⁷ The exhibition also included N.V. Bogoyavlensky's collection of one hundred twenty art objects of different ethnic origins, A.I. Pribylovsky and N.G. Arafelov's contributions of a series of Persian prints and watercolors, and over fifty Chinese prints lent from N.M. Botcharov and I.D. Vinogradov's collections.⁸⁸ The two shows were conceived by Larionov to present a bridge from preceding cultural discourses of Russia and Asia to the contemporary works by him and his colleagues, and thus further secure his claims of the contemporary Russian art carrying Russian and Eastern, particularly Asian, heritage (as opposed to referencing the various Western sources). Effectively, Larionov provided the viewer with visual evidence that his own work (as well as that of his followers) was a natural outcome of the antecedent influences carried over from the Russian people's Asian origins.⁸⁹

Modernist discourse, particularly in the period spanning the first decades of the twentieth century, always placed high stakes on innovation, taking it as the fundamental element of its value system. Just as it has today, in order to hold any significance, a work

⁸⁷Parton, 142.

⁸⁸Parton, 142.

⁸⁹Parton, 91.

of art had to be uncompromisingly innovative.⁹⁰ Moreover, an art practitioner had not only to come upon an ultimate invention, but also find means and conditions to realize the invention.⁹¹ Furthermore, it is only if and when other artists adopt the innovation that it truly acquires a chance to be recorded in the art discourse.⁹² During the period 1909-1914, the artistic and social practices of Mikhail Larionov demonstrated his awareness of all the above conditions as crucial elements in the vitality of art. Larionov demonstrated both anxiety stemming from the Western European mindset that Russian art was no more than an emulation of Western artistic practices and his awareness of the importance of promotion of the idea of innovative autonomous Russian art in order to overcome this stereotype. At least in this dimension, Larionov's choice of the anti-Western ideology looks neither patriotic nor accidental, but well thought out. It is thus tempting to consider such intense progression of the easternized rhetoric through the lens of the above problems in Larionov's artistic path.

Larionov's turn to the East was well in accordance with and influenced by the changes in Russian society. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the global process of industrialization finally reached Russia and quickly expanded. Together with the intense political transformations—the defeat by Japan in 1904-1905 and the revolution of the 1905—these changes generated a new social climate in the country. Buttressed by a wave of Russian nationalism and the Slavophiles' movement that developed in the middle of the nineteenth century as a response to westernization of Russia, these transformations

⁹⁰Notes from the Fall 2006 semester lecture course "Modernism" by Dr. Robert Jensen, Associate Professor of Art History, Art Department, University of Kentucky.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

triggered a paradigm shift in the social, moral, and cultural values of society, particularly causing change in Russian representations of the East and the West.⁹³ By the *fin-de-siècle*, there was this radical turn in Russian society from the denial of their non-European heritage to the proud acceptance and active promotion of it. This shift was especially pronounced in Moscow, the city comparatively less affected by Peter the Great's attempt to "hack a window to Europe," presenting a background for the Moscow Avant-garde's reformation of the West's views of the East and the subsequent restructuring of artistic agency. Although refraining from direct politicization of his art practice, Larionov immediately responded to the intense social debates over national identity.

One of the main reasons for Larionov's search of the alternative paradigm of Russian modernist art is an apparent straggling among the artists of the first Russian avant-garde generation, including Larionov, not so much to win the intellectual market, but gain the commercial one. Due to the lack of patronage for the young avant-garde artists in Russia and prevailing public preoccupation with the idea that valuable, high art must necessarily be of foreign origin, the beginning of the twentieth century was the period in the history of Russian art when, in order to promote one's works commercially, an artist was in critical need for the new methods and forms of public promotion. As a strategic approach to overcome these obstacles and in attempt to win the Asian (Eastern) market, Larionov sought to distance himself from the Western art discourse and rely instead on Asia and Russia's native visual vocabulary. He used those national and ethnic inspirations as the sole sources from the early beginnings of his Neoprimitivism

⁹³Sharp, *Russian Modernism Between East and West: Natalya Goncharova and The Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006), 20.

practices. His simultaneous attempts (with polemics of easternization of his work) to establish connections with potential art connoisseurs from the East and from Asia provide considerable evidence that he understood the ideology of easternization as a promotional tool. During the period when Larionov solicited the reverse of the Russian culture from the West to the East, he was at the state of active contacts and search for the patronage and collegiate support in the East.⁹⁴ Specifically, during the period when he was putting together the *Target* exhibition, Larionov wrote in his letter to a friend Iosif Shkol'nik that he had already secured the financial support for his next three exhibitions through a financial guarantee from a Persian art patron, Medzhil Saltane.⁹⁵ He also notified his friend of his intentions to exhibit together with the contemporary Persian, Georgian, and Armenian artists in the near future.⁹⁶ Although there is no direct evidence that he realized financial support from the East, Larionov's *The No.4* show (March, 23—April, 23, 1914) held works by contemporary Persian artists.⁹⁷ The newly created (or at least projected) financial conditions for art production could not be realized without the appropriate marketing and thus begged for restructuring of the rhetoric behind the artist's art practice to the compatible state. Evidently, the artist identified the pro-Eastern ideology as an effective tool of appeal to an alternative audience and patronage.

Larionov's careful choices of collaboration with other artists further testify to his radical attempts to secure the status of Russian artist liberated from the West. In his efforts to establish the *renomé* of uncompromised autonomy from Western art

⁹⁴Parton, 119.

⁹⁵Sharp, 255.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

discourse—both in his art practice and his personal image—Larionov declines Kandinsky's attempts to establish contacts with him and at least for some time neither replied to Kandinsky's letters with compliments on his art, nor did he reciprocate with invitation for Kandinsky to the *Donkey's Tail* in response to Kandinsky's invitations to Larionov to exhibit at the first *Der Blaue Reiter* show.⁹⁸ At the same time, the self-taught Georgian artist Nikos Pirosmanishvili was invited to collaborate with the *Donkey's Tail* art circle and participated in the 1913 Larionov's exhibition project *Target*, thus establishing the “mythic point of origin”—for Russian art in the cultural legacy of the East, in the case of Pirosmanishvili's, from Georgian and Armenian cultures.⁹⁹

While Larionov was mainly responsible for the dissemination of the pro-Eastern ideology into the Moscow art world of the 1912-1914, he indeed did not achieve this in isolation. He further accentuated his leading role in the pro-East polemics by allowing others to speak for him: his anti-Western emphasis was further promoted by other prominent figures of the Moscow art scene. One of the Moscow avant-garde artists, Alexander Shevchenko, declared in the work “Neoprimitivism” that:

It becomes clear that there's no longer any point in using the products of the West. . . . There's no point because we are daily in the most direct contact with Asia. They [the West] call us barbarians, Asians. Yes, we are Asia, and are proud of this . . . and we hail the East to come—the source, the cradle of all cultures, of all arts.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Gray, 79.

⁹⁹Sharp, 255.

¹⁰⁰Natalya Goncharova, “Preface to the Catalog of One-Person Exhibition, 1913” in *Russian Art if the Avant-garde* Jon E. Bowl, ed. (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1988), 55-57.

Larionov also encouraged Goncharova to participate in the ideological movement; she made substantial contributions to the promotion of the idea of independent Russian art. She declared her allegiance to indigenous traditions and the East in her speech titled “Cubism” in 1912, and used her one-person show held in Moscow in September 1913 as a vehicle to distance the Russian artist persona from the notion that they were mere emulators of Parisian art. She argued that the Russian artists’ emulation of French art was “disastrous,” and that she would no longer pay attention to the Parisian art world (or so she declared).¹⁰¹ In doing so, Goncharova communicated with her audience through a new art-political framework, orienting the audience toward the East:

French contemporaries . . . stimulated my awareness and I realized the great significance and value of the art of my country—and through it the great value of the art of the East. Hitherto I have studied all that the West could give me, as well as everything that, coming from the West, was created by my native land. Now I shake the dust from my feet and leave the West, considering its vulgarizing significance trivial and insignificant—my path is towards the source of all arts, the East. The art of my country is incomparably more profound and important than anything that I know in the West. . . . I aspire towards nationality and the East. . . . I now shake off the dust of the West from my feet and distance myself from the West, and I consider all those people ridiculous and backward who will follow Western models in the hope of becoming pure artists. . . . Contemporary Russian art reached such heights that at the present it plays a major role in world life. . . . Contemporary Western ideas cannot be of any further use to us.¹⁰²

Following this introduction to the show, numerous critical writings emerged on

¹⁰¹Sharp, 56.

¹⁰²Natalya Goncharova, “Preface to the Catalog of One-Person Exhibition, 1913” cited in *Russian Art of the Avant-garde* Jon E. Bowlton, ed. (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1988), 55-57.

Goncharova's oeuvre, further embedding her art practice as indigenously Russian and pro-Eastern. Among others, Yakov Tugenkhold, the influential Russian art critic of the time, wrote an elaborate text about Goncharova's show and the opening text, referring to Goncharova's pro-Asian rhetoric as *orientophilism*, and further promoting Goncharova's anti-Western attitude.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, it would be merely shortsighted to assume Larionov's disinterest in both the Western audience and the Western art patronage. In fact, the rhetorical "rejection" of the West by Larionov does not imply anything as explicitly as his awareness of the artistic and market value of the concept of *le bon sauvage* in the Western market. The artist's deep involvement in the polemics of Western theory of primitivism, with its consumerist appreciation of cultures uncontaminated by the West, already becomes explicit in his Neoprimitivism art practice. In this effort, Larionov's attempts to situate contemporary Russian art as completely divorced from the Western culture imply intensified interest on his part rather than genuine refusal of the West.

Although this thesis doesn't aim to perform analysis of Larionov's paintings, in order to fully understand the depth of Larionov's promotional adventurism, one must pause and evaluate these assertions, specifically those on the true autonomy of Larionov's and his followers' art. Did the artist actually have a foundation for the assertions of true autonomy of his and his followers' art?

In March of 1913 Larionov organized the exhibition *The Target*, a title Larionov chose in anticipation that "curses will be aimed at us as darts into a target."¹⁰⁴ His text in

¹⁰³Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, 276.

¹⁰⁴Letter from Mikhail Larionov to Viktor Bart, 1911. Khardzhiev-Shaga Archive, Stedelijk Museum archives, Russi, cited in Gleb Pospelov's *Bubnovy Valet*.

the exhibition catalog once again rejected Western influence in favor of Russian and Eastern cultural traditions.¹⁰⁵ Rayonism, which Larionov and Goncharova began developing in 1911,¹⁰⁶ was introduced for the first time at this exhibition and played a key role in the history of Modernism, presenting an embodiment one of the first fundamental steps in the development of abstract art.¹⁰⁷

Larionov's concerns with the dynamic qualities of painting—surface, rhythm, tension, color, contrast—led to the formation of this Russian Modernist movement. Although probably not through the intent of its creator, Rayonism (the style Larionov promoted as the quintessence of autonomous Russian art) nonetheless testifies better than any other style to the influence that Western ideas (particularly those from Cubism and Italian Futurism) had on Russian art. For example, angular Cubist-like shapes and geometrical overlapping facets in Larionov's *Red Rayonism* (1913, Figure III.2) are closely packed and floating freely in a space that is also marked with a series of sharp diagonals. Most Rayonist paintings, including this one, like their Cubist analogs, are executed nearly monochromatically through tonal graduations. Just as Cubism is concerned with the problems of space, Rayonist painting is concerned with spatial forms' objective existence. Extending the process of abstraction and shifting the concerns of painting away from representation and toward new formal freedom, Rayonist painting emphasizes color, mass, texture, planar composition, and a two-dimensional picture

¹⁰⁵Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, 56.

¹⁰⁶Dates referring to the beginning of Rayonism style differ from source to source, mainly due to the known fact that Larionov practiced pre-dating his works. Currently, I refrain from speculations on this subject and refer here to the dates that Antony Parton established in *Mikhail Larionov and The Russian Avant-Garde*.

¹⁰⁷Gray, 134.

plane. As with Cubist paintings, “the attention is attracted to the very essence of a painting: combination of colors, their saturation and transparency, relationships between the color masses, their depth and texture.”¹⁰⁸

Theories of the fourth spatial dimension—known as hyperspace, where “true forms” are found perpendicular to all the three spatial dimensions—were explored in French Cubist literature and undoubtedly contributed to Larionov’s theoretical writings on Rayonism.¹⁰⁹ In the essay “Rayonist Painting,” Larionov practically cites Western ideas on hyperspace in art, although with formal shifts, explaining that “the painting [that is, Rayonist painting] in a way slides, giving a sensation of existing outside of time and space, creating the impression of what might be called the fourth dimension, since the length, breadth, and density of the paint layer are the only signs of our surrounding world. All the sensations surrounding the picture are of a different order.”¹¹⁰

Another apparent influence on Rayonism was Italian Futurism, in spite of Larionov’s claims that all resemblance between Italian Futurism and Rayonism was merely coincidence and constituted nothing but the imminent result of progress in art.¹¹¹ One of the fundamental aspects of Futurism that were integrated into Rayonism was the concept of dynamism—the mechanical movements, the idea of *linee forze* [lines of force]. Executed in a dynamic Futurist rhythm, Rayonist painting demonstrates the grasp of the elusive forms and objects created by rays of light reflecting from an object, an attempt very similar conceptually and in visual logic to the lines of force in Futurist

¹⁰⁸Mikhail Larionov, “Rayonist Painting” cited in Bowl, 91-99.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 100-02.

¹¹¹Pospelov, 47.

works. Furthermore, consideration of Rayonist works like Goncharova's *Cats* (1912), Larionov's *Glass* (1912), and Kazimir Malevich's *Knife Grinder* (1912) make it explicit that, like Futurism, Rayonism reflected the new reality of urban civilization, where men depended on machines and where the concepts of speed, light, and energy were closely connected.¹¹²

Ironically, the influence of Futurism on the practices of Russian Avant-garde is especially well-demonstrated through the published manifestos of Larionov, Goncharova, and other Russian Avant-garde artists wherein they promoted the idea, among others, of independent art in Russia:

Long live nationality! We march hand in hand with our ordinary house painters.

Long live the style of Rayonist painting that we created! We are against the West, which is vulgarizing our forms and Eastern forms, and which is bringing down the level of everything.¹¹³

Many manifestos of the Russian artists included enthusiastic denials of Western influence, and most authors were cautious about providing any reason to draw parallels between their and Western art practices (going so far as to invent neologisms such as *budushniki* instead of borrowing the European-coined term *futuristy*).¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Italian Futurists pioneered the idea of artist manifestos with their *Futurist Manifesto*, well-known in Russia since the day after its release in Italy in 1909.¹¹⁵ Consequently,

¹¹²Bowl, xxxiii.

¹¹³Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, "Luchisty i Budushniki. Manifest" in Markov, V., ed. *Manifesty I Programmy Russkih Futiristov* (New Academia Publishing, 2006): 47-55.

¹¹⁴Bowl, 87-91.

¹¹⁵Gray, 134.

even if one was to disregard both similarities in the texts of the Futurist Manifesto and the manifestos produced by Russian artists during the years of 1910-1914s—similarities in style and in content—the fact that the Russian Avant-garde wrote manifestos demonstrates the influence of Italian Futurism on the Russian art world and direct connection to the Western modernist art discourse.

In 1913, prominent Moscow art critic Nikolai Punin further nourished the Moscow art world's ideological rejection of Western influence in art.¹¹⁶ In particular, he described Vladimir Tatlin's "departure from cubism" in detail and characterized it as an act of artistic freedom, then suggested that Tatlin's introduction of counter-relief indicated his involvement in Russia's "Eastern traditions," the Byzantine legacy of the icon and fresco and Russian *riza* (revetement)¹¹⁷ However, while the evidence for Punin's enthusiastic proclamations remains vague, the closer examination of Tatlin's works presents a rich indication to the contrary: Tatlin's counter-reliefs evidence the utilization of Braque and Picasso's Cubist language, particularly that of Picasso's sculptures and collages, by the artist. Specifically, in his works, Tatlin demonstrated interpretation and further development of the Cubist experiments with mass and light, making objects seem weightless, bringing natural shadows to the works, and including real objects in his constructions. Just as we saw earlier in Cubist compositions, the works attain a quality of non-objectivity and appear to lose their bearings. Furthermore, as with Cubist collages, the physicality of the elements of Tatlin's works, detached from their original use and function, deprive the audience of their reference to reality.

¹¹⁶Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, 18

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 22.

There is enough evidence in the above few examples of the artists' works to conclude that Larionov and his followers deliberately denied the obvious connections with the Western modernist practices of the time while being very well aware of their existence. Although Larionov and his followers actively stressed their allegiance to indigenous traditions, the influence of Western innovation in art of their time is apparent. Regardless of how successful, strategically appealing, and fruitful the idea Russian art's autonomy may have been, and regardless of how well the manifestos and pamphlets produced by the artists and art critics convinced the outside art world, the evidence found within the body of works by these artists as well as their activities speaks to the contrary: their works show an obvious continuity with and references to many European styles, including Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. Despite their bold assertions of independence from preceding Western art discourse, the issue of autonomy in the case of the Russian Avant-garde is a tenuous argument about subject matter that does not hold up with regard to the actual works.

This, however, makes it ever more explicit that Larionov was deliberately manipulating art through the rhetoric he offered in public, all the while aware that his art demonstrably carried demonstrable references to Western works of art. His recognition of western art language and appropriation of it in his works is evident and beyond reproach. Larionov's talent as an art promoter pivoted on his ability to conjure up both the nationalistic sentiment and the significance of *other* as a "common European solution to the avant-garde artist's status of the margins of the art world/market,"¹¹⁸ which proved effective amid both the domestic and international art markets up to the present. Whether

¹¹⁸Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, 255.

genuinely supporting them or simply utilizing them for his own benefit, Larionov used Slavophile and orientophilist concepts as a vehicle to reconceptualize Russian art as independent of Western influence. The artist's efforts, along with those of sympathetic artists and critics of the time (Zdanevich, Punin, Tugenkhold, etc.), have constructed solid framework for an autonomous Russian art identity. Larionov's articulations fundamentally reshaped the rhetoric surrounding their work, and for some period of time he and his colleagues successfully argued that the affinity of Russian art with Western art discourse had been a mere coincidence or accident, and was expected be treated as such. Such an ideological convergence of art and politics allowed Russian modernist art to emerge as an independent discourse in the Russian art scene and largely contributed to the reshaping the evolutionary narrative on Russian Avant-garde from Western origins to Russian and Eastern roots.



Figure III.1. Ilya Mashkov, *Self-portrait and Portrait of Pyotr Konchalovsky*, 1910. State Russian Museum, St.Petersburg.



Figure III.2. Mikhail Larionov, Red Rayonism, 1913. Merzinger Collection, Switzerland.

IV. In Search for New Media

Deconstructing the Contexts

The 1913 *Target* exhibition captured the moment of deliberate deviation from the traditional art forms in Larionov's artistic path. In order to recognize this shift in Larionov's practice, it is not as much the art objects themselves, but the curatorial practices of the artist that require close attention in this show. It was during the *Target* that Larionov demonstrated his arrival to the idea of deliberate manipulation of an art work's context—the rhetoric of Eastern tradition behind his works, the mode of the works' presentation, the preceding and the anticipated publications, the interviews—in other words, every bit of information and every aspect of the environment created around the physical art object becomes as important for the shaping of the meaning of it as an art object itself. Larionov expended his efforts on manipulating these contexts, and hence during the show he switched his focus on the physical art object to an active manipulation of art exhibiting contexts. He established the structural importance of the context of the venue for the art work and effectively demonstrated that artistic statement can be made not only through the art object but through the manner of the art work presentation. Specifically, in the case of *The Target* show, Larionov overtly challenged the institution of formal artistic education of the time, as well as the corrupting quality of one's reputable name in art, leading an artist to stagnation. The artist communicated this criticism specifically through the manner of works' presentation at the show—collections of children's artworks (collections of the Ukrainian artist Alexander Shevchenko and an architect, Nikolai Vinogradov), works of self-taught authors (Nikos Piromanishvili's body

of works), and the painted street signboards are presented along with and given the same curatorial treatment as those of professional artists.¹¹⁹ Most importantly, the artist deliberately refused to affix the names (and thus the status) of the artists next to any of the works at the exhibition; instead the works were enumerated and identified only by their titles. Through these endeavors, Larionov commented on the problem of significance of an academic education for an artist. Moreover, he negated the influence of the artist's identity on the viewer, thus transgressing the idea of dominance of authorship and the role of "Artist-God"¹²⁰ in shaping the meaning of an artwork, and thoroughly rejecting the benefits of the celebrity artist momentum. Larionov's deliberate withdrawal of an author—that is, himself—from the "text" on the one hand liberates the viewer from the artist's identity context and assigns directly to the viewer the ultimate task to interpret and analyze art on the other.

This notion of authorial withdrawal becomes even more complicated when it is considered against the background of Larionov's other activities during the show, which demonstrate that he took a rather ambivalent position on the issue of celebrity artists. Particularly, he consistently demonstrated his obvious recognition of personal fame appears as an essential prerequisite for the promotion of new art through constant public appearances, multiple interviews, speeches and publications both prior to and during the

¹¹⁹"Russia, 1913: Cinema in the Cultural Landscape" by Yuri Tsivian in Abel, R. *Silent Film* (City: The Athlon Press, 1999), 209; Parton, 71.

¹²⁰Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 142-149, presented a theoretical foundation for the discussion about an artist's control over the meaning of his own work. Barthes' challenge to the influence of the author was a radical attempt to counterbalance the significance of the "Author-God." Although Barthes' work comes much later than the exhibition in discussion, I choose to use the term here because Larionov's practice is effectively illustrated through the Barthes' argument.

show. Having once secured the flow of audience to the exhibition, however, Larionov freed the viewer from any propaganda. He intentionally denied the notion of genius and deliberately refused a chance for an artist's established authority to influence an observer. In doing so, the artist insisted on the separation of the viewers' education and preserved the viewer's right to the unmediated experience of art, freed of an artist's authority context, and thus allowed the viewer to see art in transience rather than through an artist's preceding oeuvre and artistic success.

Though the *Target* marks Larionov's first exhibit of his Rayonism paintings, the exhibition also signifies the moment in the artist's career when the canonical form of work of art—a painting—began to lose its central position in his body of work and to recede to the margins of the artist's practice. Soon after the show, Larionov took his practice of making the viewer question the contexts in art even further than his comments on the institutional structure of art in Russia through the mode of art works' presentation. The artist not only continued to further transgress on the established institutional art system, but found it necessary for the vitality of his art production to abandon the canvas all together, at least for the period of his career in Russia, effectively expressing in action what Kassimir Malevich expressed in words a several years later: "The brushes are withdrawing further and further.. the [genre of] painting itself is long gone."¹²¹ The genius of Malevich, however, consists in the fact that while proclaiming the end of the painting era he used the genre of painting. Evidently, Larionov found it impossible not to refrain from this connective element, relying on the theory of Rayonism as a sufficient logical bridge for a viewer to recognize his practice. In this dimension, the strikingly

¹²¹Khardzhiev, Malevich, 122.

beautiful and short-lived period of Rayonist canvases represents what is in fact the culminating point in the genre of painting for Larionov.

The Film

During the last months in Russia, while furthering his Rayonist polemics, Larionov's artistic searches extended far beyond canvas and oil paint. In 1913, Russian film director Vladimir Kasyanov approached Mikhail Larionov with the suggestion of making a "futurist film."¹²² By November of the same year, Larionov and other collaborating members of the Russian futurists' artistic circle presented a short (431 meters) motion picture, the first work in the history of Russian film designed by the Avant-garde artists.¹²³ The film was released with the title *Drama v Kabare Futuristov #13* [*Drama in the Futurist Cabaret #13*] in January of 1914.¹²⁴ The work presents one of the most prominent cases of Larionov's artistic searches beyond the limits of the canvas and picture frame.

The medium of film had interested Mikhail Larionov as early as 1912.¹²⁵ Recognizing the medium not only as a dynamic visual art's means of production that offered many new creative possibilities, but also as a grand propaganda device for his

¹²²Parton, 71.

¹²³The film *Drama in the Futurist Cabaret #13* did not survive to the present. Multiple film reviews, published in January 1914, and the memoirs of Vladimir Kasyanov (Gosfilmfond, Moscow, Russia) are currently the only available material for plot restoration. Of the secondary sources, the summary of the film descriptions by Semen Ginsburg in his *Kinematografiya v dorevolucionnoj Rossii*, as well as those by Yuri Tsivian's and Antony Parton, present very helpful compilation of information on the film. Of the visual material there is only a photo of one frame from the film, depicting Larionov and Maksimovich, shortly after the climax of the "drama."

¹²⁴"Russia, 1913: Cinema in the Cultural Landscape" by Yuri Tsivian in Abel, R. *Silent Film* (City: The Athlon Press, 1999), 209.

¹²⁵Parton, 71.

other art forms and concepts, Larionov, along with Goncharova, authored the plot, starred in the film (along with other *budushniki*), and produced the design of the film decorations, using extensively his rayonistic ideograms throughout the entire work.¹²⁶ To ensure the dialogue with the viewer, Larionov integrated the pop culture constituents of the time, such as the tango dance that was so *en vogue* in the Moscow of 1913. The work was set up in the imaginary *cabaret artistique*, which was also a grand phenomenon in the contemporary cultural landscape of Moscow, where “serious dramatic theater seemed once and for all to have broken down into forms of scenic *Kleinkunst*—the *cabaret* and *vaudeville* format (called ‘theater of miniatures’ in Russia), which looked preposterous on the Russian stage.”¹²⁷

The film is sliced and at times disconnected; there is obvious reference in its dynamics to the Cubism legacy of collage. The scenes resemble separate acts that compose one evening program of the *cabaret* theater. The ironic language presents the dominant syntactic approach of the film—Larionov suggests a critical attitude towards the “high” and the “low” of the cultural milieu of the city, offering simultaneously an ironic commentary on the industry of entertainment of the contemporary Moscow and presenting his own works and ideas in the same tone.

The opening frame of the film carries the subheading “The hour thirteen has struck. The Futurists are gathering for the party.”¹²⁸ Here, as in practically all of his public presentations, Larionov situates Natalya Goncharova as a central figure: the

¹²⁶Parton, 71

¹²⁷Tsivian, 194.

¹²⁸Ibid., 209.

opening scene shows the Futurists busy painting on each other, with a bare-breasted Goncharova in the center of the composition, preparing to be painted on.¹²⁹

From the first frame, Goncharova remains in the focus point of the camera throughout the entire film. In the next scene, the Futurist poet Lotov is reading a verse dedicated to Natalia Goncharova.¹³⁰ He waves a sheet of paper with the poem, repeatedly turning his back to the viewer as he reads the poem. When the paper is finally shown to the audience, the viewers witness the poem, which is comprised of hieroglyphic figures and individual letters placed chaotically on the sheet. This particular fragment of the film is necessary to be considered in parallel Larionov's involvement, during the making of the film, with the production of hand-written Futurist poetry books, the *samorunnye knigi*. In his manifesto "The Written Character As It Is" (1913), Velimir Khlebnikov stresses the new poetry's priority of the visual matter of speech [*zryava*], over its audible one [*slukhava*]. The scene described above serves as very effective visual expression of this thesis of Futurist poetry—the film is silent: not a single sound of the poem, indeed, reaches the film audience. It is also readable from the scene that Larionov arranges a new hierarchy between the speaker and the sign, stressing the importance of speaker's role. Larionov recognized silent film as a perfect medium to publicize the fundamental Futurist poetry concepts of denial of sense and sound.¹³¹

The next scene, "Futurist Tango," presents a solo tango performance by female dancer Elster, a Moscow celebrity. The performer is dressed in a white costume that is

¹²⁹Tsivian, 209.

¹³⁰Parton, 71.

¹³¹Tsivian, 194.

slit to her waist. While there is no need here to examine closely the reasons for the wide popularity of tango at the beginning of the century in Moscow, it is important to keep in mind that in many ways it was precisely tango that symbolized the rhythm of contemporary city life and was accepted as “connective element that united the boring and dull people with the people-creators in everyday life...a bridge from the routine life into the life of fantasy... the dance that truly revamps our contemporaneity... presenting a rhythmic contour of the world of machinery as well as one’s inner peace.” This amalgamating social quality of the tango dance was exploited by Larionov in the film, offering the audience to set off from the familiar ground. Moreover, through this accessible visual language, the film producers once again “educate” a viewer on the hierarchy of arts: when it is already established to the film viewer that Larionov situates Goncharova as the persona at the reins of the high art production, the celebrity tango dancer Elster finishes her performance, kneeling before Goncharova, the creator of high art, and kissing her foot.¹³²

In the following act, Goncharova performs a tap dance, and soon this event leads to the climax moment of the film, to the actual “drama” – an *apache* dance, performed on a table by a couple chosen through the group of Futurists drawing lots.¹³³ Larionov and his partner Maksimovich are chosen for this “Futuredance of Death” performance; as they are dancing armed with crooked daggers, it is expected that only one of them will remain alive in the end of the dance.¹³⁴ Eventually, Larionov throws his woman partner

¹³²Parton, 71.

¹³³Tsivian, 194.

¹³⁴Ibid., 210.

Maksimovich from one arm to another, strikes her with knife, and kills her.¹³⁵ The caption “Futureburial” appears on the screen. Bare-breasted, covered with Rayonist ideograms, the “killed” woman is taken by Larionov out into the winter street (Figure IV.1).

According to some academics, the woman on the survived frame is Natalya Goncharova, which opinion was possibly engendered in the West by the pioneering work on Russian Avant-garde—Camilla Gray’s *The Russian Experiment in Art*—and has an unknown basis in the case of several Russian-language secondary sources that stated it.¹³⁶ Perhaps because the film did not survive, and we have to base our judgment only on the snapshot of one film frame, and perhaps because of Goncharova’s close professional and personal connection to Larionov, the woman’s face, partially covered with the Rayonistic ideograms, was recognized by many art historians as Goncharova’s. However, regardless of all the convenience for historians and the probable visual likeness of the woman in the photo to Goncharova, the possibility of the woman to be Natalia Goncharova is rather unlikely. An unknown person, (the discovery of whose identity was limited to me only to her last name—Maksimovich—and the fact that she was “just a girl,” or in other words, someone who enjoyed hanging around in the Russian Futurists’ circle) rather than the central figure of the Russian Avant-garde performed the part. The possibility for the woman in this snapshot to be Goncharova is negligible; even if there were no evidence pointing to Maksimovich, and even if we tried to exaggerate

¹³⁵Parton, 71.

¹³⁶Gray, 79.

Larionov's self-ironic attitude and deny any traces of logical development of the plot in this film. The final scene depicts the "corpse" of the woman lying in the snow and followed by the caption "A victim of futurism!" Larionov always placed Goncharova as the highest end, the quintessence of Russian art. To allow a thought that Larionov would have decided or would have let someone else to decide that the film would end with Goncharova thrown out as a victim of Futurism would be preposterous, even in such an embodiment of the theatre of the absurd as this film. Moreover, reading the woman's figure as Goncharova doesn't simply undermine Larionov's life-long commitment— that is the promotion of Goncharova before himself or any other artist—but defies his promotional practice of Goncharova of any logic and consistency. It is possible that (perhaps, due to the lack of accessibility to many archives during the Soviet times), when claiming Goncharova's presence at the snapshot, none of the art historians was aware either of the film description or of Larionov's inexhaustible attempts to situate Goncharova as a quintessence of progressive art.

The only surviving frame presents the single source of the invaluable material where the contemporary viewer can observe the interaction between the futuristic ideograms, the human bodies and the surrounding environment in the film. The ideograms drawn on the bodies of the actors and the building (all executed in Rayonist style) do not simply repeat each other but generate a synergetic continuum that engenders a distinct visual tension for the viewer and increases the chance for a viewer to consider reading the signs as text. There is also an obvious comment on the replacement of traditional art media, possibly without loss of conceptual or pictorial qualities of an art work. Moreover, the still frame produces yet another effect (possibly inaccessible to the

movie spectator of 1914): the still makes perceptible the Larionov's deliberate decision to subordinate human bodies to the canonic laws of art composition and use the transcending quality of the ideograms to amalgamate the elements of the composition.

In the next scene Larionov demonstrates "the moment of weakness" and violates the code of the "Futureburial," kissing his victim before throwing her "corpse" into the snow. Upon his return to the *cabaret*, the futurists find out that Larionov kissed his victim and exile him from Futurism, "on the grounds of sentimentality."¹³⁷ The exile finds the punishment unbearable—he drinks poison and drops dead at the door of the venue.¹³⁸ The evening ends, and one by one, demonstratively stepping over Larionov's "corpse," the futurists leave the cabaret. The last one of them attaches a note to Larionov's body, which reads "expelled from futurism." The final scene returns the viewer to Maksimovich's "corpse" lying on the snow and the final captions read "A victim of futurism!"

Drawing of a concrete meaning from the film proves to be a rather elusive matter. The surviving descriptions of the film, although thorough, leave us only with an approximated version of the work. By slicing and disconnecting the plot, Larionov deliberately subverts the idea of the explicit narrative as a necessary element for art production, giving the preference to collage technique in the film production and thus problematizing both the nature of visual representation of his ideas and one's search for the ultimate meaning of the film. The film is designed as a collage of clichés of Moscow mass culture of the time—there are the "wild futurists-barbarians," the allusions to

¹³⁷Tsivian, 209.

¹³⁸Parton, 71.

anarchists-terrorists circles, the elements of the boulevard tear-jerking novel, a bohemian life style, the aesthetics of advertisement, the grotesque and pure absurd.¹³⁹ The picture (or rather its description) gives an intense sensation of the Moscow Zeitgeist, where art was created and almost immediately dissolved into the everyday reality of the city. In this respect, the artists' usage of the pop-culture traits in the film could be read as an attempt to build intellectual bridges between high art and the general public. Perhaps Camilla Gray was correct in her interpretation of the film, asserting that the artists tried to spread the language of high art out into the streets of Moscow, into the everyday life of common dwellers, seeking "to allow him [an artist] to become, as they... so profoundly felt the need to be, an active citizen" and to reconcile the high art with the society, "which has dismissed art into its ivory tower."¹⁴⁰

Larionov's search for new means of art production is distinct; the film serves as a testimony to his understanding of the medium of film as new vital form of visual art—unstable, transient, transcending and permeable, deconstructing the traditional limits of art, breaking the traditional limits between different art forms, instantly changing, and in such qualities reiterating the essence not only of the avant-garde art dynamics but the life rhythm of their time. It is remarkable that only few years later the Italian Futurists published their "Cinemanifesto," where they stressed precisely the quality of the film to interrogate traditional limits of visual representation and the limits of canvas. As explicitly demonstrated in the "Drama in Futurist Cabaret #13," the ability of the film to break the boundaries between different forms of art as well as between art and life was

¹³⁹E. Bobrinskaya, "Konceptiya Rskraski Litsa ili Futuristicheskij Grim"[The Concept of Face Painting or the Futuristic maquillage] in *Vestnik istorii, literatury, iskusstva*, (Moscow: Nauka, 2005), 91.

¹⁴⁰Gray, 116.

understood by the Italian Futurists as a fundamental purpose of film—“this new inspiration for artists’ searches that will motivate them to break the limits of the painting frame... bring into motion the words that break the limits of literature and connect with the art of music, visual art, art of noise, and construct a... bridge between a word and a real object”¹⁴¹ In some ways, the film is a parody of such a life rhythm, in some ways—a pure provocation, but most importantly it was a new form of artistic practice where the artist combined the new reality of the cinematography with the preceding Rayonist discourse (this time not depicting light rays but using them as a medium) as well as obviously sought to position himself as a leader of Russian Futurism—a dominant movement in the contemporaneous Russian art world.

Futuristic Ideograms. Countenance Painting

In the “Drama in Cabaret #13,” through the usage of the human body as a medium for art practice, Larionov presents to the Russian art milieu yet another result of his search for an alternative art forms, more specifically countenance painting or futuristic ideograms, an art genre that comes as a continuum of Larionov’s pro-Eastern ideology and Rayonist theory, relying on the inherently non-Western media and techniques (body-painting was at the time associated with Asian peoples¹⁴²) to resolve the problems of spatial tensions in his Rayonist searches. In the manifesto “Why Do We Paint Ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto” (1913), Larionov claims that he started the practice of countenance

¹⁴¹Bobrinskaya, 99.

¹⁴²Sharp, 39.

painting in 1905, when he painted a nude against the background of a carpet and extended design onto her. However, no public or even studio presentations were made of his countenance painting practice from 1905, or at least none of the evidence survived to the present. While considering 1905 the beginning of countenance painting is appealing, it would mean to rely solely on Larionov's words, which is particularly problematic since Larionov, like many artists of the region and time period, is known for predating his work. The first public demonstration of countenance painting practice is dated to 1912¹⁴³; this date is much more in accordance with the dynamics of Larionov's artistic career. The countenance art performance acts in which Larionov and Russian Futurists (*budushniki*) regularly strolled along the Kuznetsky Most in Moscow dressed eccentrically and with the ideograms painted on their faces (attracting attention usually to the extent of police involvement) are dated to September 1913.¹⁴⁴ The face painting artworks rapidly turned into a trademark by which the Russian futurists (not only the visual arts practitioners, but poets, writers, art critics) were recognized at public gatherings and in the streets.

In the fall of 1913, through both the film and the manifesto "Why do We Paint Ourselves," Larionov incepts the popularization of this new form of art and corroborates his earlier attempts to situate the practice of countenance painting strictly as a work of art, moving it from the ambivalent status of the artist's gimmick to the position of a legitimate art genre.¹⁴⁵ Larionov's attempt with this new art form to bring "art into masses and by this transcend not only the limits of canvas but the limits of the artworld

¹⁴³Bowl, 79.

¹⁴⁴Ilya Zhdanevich, Mikhail Larionov, "Why do We Paint Ourselves" in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*. Bowl, John E., ed., Thames and Hudson, 1988; 80.

¹⁴⁵Produced in collaboration with Ilya Zdanevich.

(at the time, already a divorcée from society) is particularly noticeable when one considers his choices for the publication of the written materials on the countenance painting. The artist's choice of the magazine *Argus* (St. Petersburg, Christmas number, 1913, pp.114-18) as the place for the first publication of the manifesto "Why Do We Paint Ourselves" appears surprising only at first sight—the staid *Argus* was in no way an avant-garde periodical, and the manifesto was presented there evidently to appeal to its traditional reader, the upper and the middle class of the Russia.

Not only the film itself, but also the concept of countenance painting is of the most prominent manifestations of the artist's deliberate withdrawal from the canvas and the active search for alternative media and art forms. As any innovation, this new art form did not appear from nowhere: in terms of its visual logic it is closely associated with Larionov's Rayonism. Upon its very emergence in 1911, the concept of the Rayonism implied universality, hence Larionov's attempts for the syntactic logic of Rayonism to enter poetry, theatre, scenography, and fashion. The style of Rayonism suggested penetrability and mutual openness of the individual forms of art in relation to each other, as well as the reciprocal openness and penetrability of Art and the reality of everyday life.¹⁴⁶ The central component of the Rayonism concept—a ray—provoked such openness by itself: working in Rayonism, an artist deals (according to Larionov's Rayonism theory) with sliding, shifting, constantly changing reality comprised of the "ray dust," rays' reflections that challenge any borders and contexts, including the limits of canvas, frame, museum and gallery exhibits, and are spread everywhere.¹⁴⁷ Having

¹⁴⁶Bobrinskaya, 89.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

studied closely Rayonism, one could say that the genre of countenance painting with its rejection of boundaries was in many ways an anticipated consequence of Rayonism.

As the Rayonist canvases, the countenance painting is closely connected with Futurism; thus some aspects of futuristic aesthetics become principally important for understanding this concept. The fundamental futuristic qualities—the transience, the immersion of art into the ever-changing life stream—are immediately recognizable in the genre of countenance painting. The painting is instantaneous, transient, momentarily dissolving: “Tattooing doesn’t interest us. People tattoo themselves once and for always. We paint ourselves for an hour, and a change of experience calls for a change of the painting; just as picture devours picture, when on the other side of a car windshield, the shop windows flash by running into each other: that’s our faces...Our painting is the newsman.”¹⁴⁸

Another central aspect of the countenance painting that requires attention is the concept of simultaneous vision, originally promoted at the time by Marinetti.¹⁴⁹ The countenance painting integrates one of the most effective elements of simultaneous vision, that is, when objects placed at different distances from each other are visually accepted as if they are placed next to each other: “how many times did we see a horse that runs in the far end of the street on the cheek of a lady with whom at that moment we had a conversation?”¹⁵⁰ Larionov’s ideogram “Portrait of a Prostitute” (1913) that first appeared as a drawing in M. Bolshakov’s collection of poems “Le Futur” serves as an

¹⁴⁸Bowlit, 19.

¹⁴⁹Bobrinskaya, 89.

¹⁵⁰Bobrinskaya, 91.

effective illustration of the above Marinetti quote – Larionov’s integration of the idea of simultaneity is communicated in the painting where the street woman is sporting a figure of a bicyclist on her left cheek (Figure IV.2). By abandoning canvas, Larionov brings his simultaneity practice to a more complete condition. Such practice presents even more literal implementation of the idea of simultaneous vision not mediated by rational thinking, the central concern of which is to embrace the whole picture of life, breaking the distance between objects and allowing them to penetrate each other.

Larionov’s concept of face painting exists in parallel with his several other projects, among which were futuristic cuisine (which emerged years earlier than the Italian Futurists’ similar idea), futuristic body language, futuristic fashion, futuristic theater.¹⁵¹ In other words, futuristic countenance painting exists both as an independent art form and as an element of a much more wide universal program of new art, on which Larionov and his followers worked at the time.¹⁵² Fashion as a social phenomenon resolves an especially important aspect in the formation of Larionov’s countenance painting. In “Why Do We Paint Ourselves,” fashion is considered ambivalently—it is both a close analogy to the ideas of futurism and a cultural domain, which countenance painting challenges: “City dwellers have for a long time been varnishing their nails in pink, contouring their eyes, painting their lips, rouge their cheeks—however, all they are doing is imitate the earth. As for us—the creators—we have nothing to do with the earth; our lines and colors have emerged with us. Were we given the plumage of parrots, we’d pluck the feathers for the sake of brush and pencil. Were we given eternal beauty—we’d

¹⁵¹Bobrinskaya, 91.

¹⁵²Ibid.

daub it over and kill it, we, those who know no half measures.”¹⁵³ Larionov deliberately subverts the street fashion and uses the promotional mechanisms of this cultural phenomenon as a vehicle for passage of his art into societal reality, for entering the new aesthetics into the masses. Nonetheless, the commodity aspect of fashion appears to be alien to the artist; Larionov clearly asserted his position on the problem of commodification: “Self-painting is one of the new valuables that belong to the people as they all do in our day and age. The old ones were incoherent and squashed flat by money... Beware, you who collect and guard them—you will soon be beggars.”¹⁵⁴

He further popularized the ideograms through newspaper interviews announcing the “Manifesto to a Man” and “Manifesto to a Woman” with a concept of a new fashion, a new style where Larionov’s ideograms became a pinnacle of theatricalizing one’s appearance: men were suggested to walk in sandals, paint their legs and feet, shave off half of their beards or mustaches, and wear flowers behind their ears and golden tassels in their hair. Women were suggested to go bare-breasted, with ideograms painted on their breasts.¹⁵⁵ While there were only stories alleging that Moscow ladies enthusiastically offered Larionov to use his brushes and paint on their breasts, the practice of countenance painting truly became a fad; the practice was adopted by the renowned Moscow fashionistas such as A.D. Privalova. The news that Russian futurists and all the nobility would go around “with horses and houses drawn and painted on their cheeks, foreheads and necks” reached France, and soon the Russian press reported that “the new art of

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ilya Zhdanevich, Mikhail Larionov, “Why do We Paint Ourselves” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*. Bowl, John E., ed., Thames and Hudson, 1988; 79.

¹⁵⁵Bobrinskaya, E., 91.

painting one's face devised by Larionov and Goncharova has now caught on in Paris," carrying the term *la mode russe*.¹⁵⁶ Countenance painting presented a vital expression of how contingent, transient, unstable, and thus quintessentially modern was Larionov's art practice at the time. Regardless of obvious connections with the Futurism, it demonstrates principally new aspects that can be understood as pre-Dada elements in Larionov's practice. Neither the self-painting works, nor the manifesto "Why Do We Paint Ourselves" carry the language of ideological dramatization of artistic practice, nor do they contain the motives of valiant reformation of life so intrinsic to Futurism. In this sense, countenance painting stands as an antagonist of Futurism: the genre carries the language of *carnavalesque* with its irony and self-irony, grotesque, demonstrable absurdity, and the tendency to theatricalize everyday reality. Formulated later in the decade, Hugo Ball's idea of a "deep anarchical essence of art" is already profound in this practice of Larionov's; in synergy with the futurist aesthetics it produces this delocalized, transient art, free from canonic contexts of canvas and frame, with their strict system of coordinates.¹⁵⁷ There is an obvious explanation in the self-painting as to Larionov's apparent dissatisfaction and therefore his short-lived interest in the genre of film: through countenance painting, Larionov challenges even this new medium—the painted ideograms construct a new visual form, completely delocalized, ephemeral, not limited by the screen, not possible to be repeated, and spread everywhere, completely dissolved in everyday reality. The artist actively develops new contexts for his art and yet again questions the dogmatic construction of the contemporary art institution—through his

¹⁵⁶Parton, 67.

¹⁵⁷Parton, 67.

peripatetic paintings, he contests the necessity for an artwork to be presented in the appropriate venue, placing an art work outside of the traditional limits of canvas, frame, and gallery, ultimately “taking art to the streets.”¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

Stylistic ambivalence became Mikhail Larionov’s artistic *modus operandi* and the crux of his legacy. Through the creation of a new artistic syntax—both in media and conceptually—Larionov contested the established canons and broke the linear process in the development of art in Russia. Such artistic transgression became the essence of his artistic output, and makes his work the major case in the period from 1910-1915 in Russia that advances to the level of innovative art.

By refusing to affix a single style to his artistic practice, Larionov ceded the interpretive high ground for his work to the critics and art historians. Larionov further complicated his oeuvre by situating it in two dimensions: within a canvas and outside of it, where the latter is presently floating in between the paradigms of modernism and falling outside of current art historical narrative on the history of Russian Avant-garde. The artist’s transgressions of the canonical media and genres, his deliberate withdrawal from the Western canon of the artist as Master of a singular style, and his detachment from the painting as a solitary form of artistic practice are indispensable elements in understanding his work as his paintings. If viewed as a whole, his oeuvre exists as a continuum between the two dimensions, presenting a complex interconnected polylogue

¹⁵⁸ See Ilya Zdanevich, Mikhail Larionov, “Why Do We Paint Ourselves” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*. Bowlton, John E., ed., Thames and Hudson, 1988; 79.

of equally important components that are interdependent and synergetic. Ignoring part of his oeuvre results in a qualitative change for the rest of it.

If we take into consideration Larionov's position as a central figure in the events of 1910-1915 in Russia, along with his deviation from the canonical genre and media in art production, uncertainty arises about the current gestalt homogeneity of the Modernist discourse, where painting presents the apogee of high art in the Modernist era in Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century. The ambivalence of the artist calls into question the contemporary understanding of the Early Russian Avant-garde and its presentation in art history. Specifically, Larionov's case leaves one no choice but to question the current attempts to approach the history of art in Russia strictly within the context of modernist art historical discourse. It is even more conflicting that the artist's oeuvre is subjected to Western (regardless of the geographical origin of the authors) modernist art historical evaluation, given that in Russia of 1910-1915 his persona was becoming more influential the more the artist appeared to be in dissonance with the pivotal aspects of Western modernist art history.

The foundations of contemporary Western art history evaluative methods can be traced back both to the history of connoisseurship and collecting in Western civilization. By the middle of the eighteenth century style had been established as a prevailing syntax for an artist's work, specifically due to Winckelmann's book *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764). Besides structuring the existing knowledge in the field of fine art and establishing the hierarchy of styles, the work presented theoretical support for practical knowledge of art. Winckelmann's ideas of style were strengthened by the nineteenth century German writings on art history and cultural philosophy. Particularly, Henrich

Wolfflin's work *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888), although opposed to Winckelmann's idea of the dominant normative aesthetic, corroborated his principles of evaluating art through the stylistic characteristics of work. These works were able to fully structure the syntax of contemporary art history as a discipline driven by the notion of style and, consequently, as a discipline that neglects a significant amount of artistic work merely for ideological reasons. At least at the time of the early period of its formation, art history as a discipline was evolving as a byproduct of commercial activity, namely, art collecting, as well as connoisseurship, another commercially rooted activity. Being the fundamental elements in the evolution of art history as a discipline, collecting and connoisseurship also became central among the reasons for the development of the notion of style (and the preference of certain established forms of art over the others) into the leading aspects in the evaluation of the work of art in Western culture. Art history as a discipline was pinned to the marketplace, and demonstrated its dependence on these two aspects, adding a strong preference for palpable and mobile art objects, as the form of the most liquid currency in art. This is clearly manifested in the case of Larionov's kinetic sculptures from the "Vystavka Zhivopisi. 1915 God" show from 1915 as well as in the cases of the artist's exhibition, promotion and art dispute practices, countenance painting, performance works and film production practice (given that the film was lost). Specifically, the materialistic dependence of the discipline explains in part why artistic innovation, even in such an extreme and potent form of avant-garde practice as Larionov's, didn't secure the artist's entrance to a canonical modernist oeuvre.

The multistylistic tendencies in Larionov's artistic practice and his constant experiment outside the accepted genres did not corroborate the traditions of modernist

period in Western art, or at least did not do so explicitly. Just as his fluid artistic praxis called for new framework at every public appearance, so does his legacy now require a multi-paradigm approach. A more objective and complete art historical outlook on the artist's legacy can be gained only by breaking the limitations of the critical approach on the artist's oeuvre that at present are consonant strictly with the Western modernist art historical framework. The acknowledgement that Larionov's work (and hence the history of art in Russia of 1910-1915) can neither be defined nor comprehensively studied through the foci of Western modernist art historical discourse is crucial and eminently necessary.

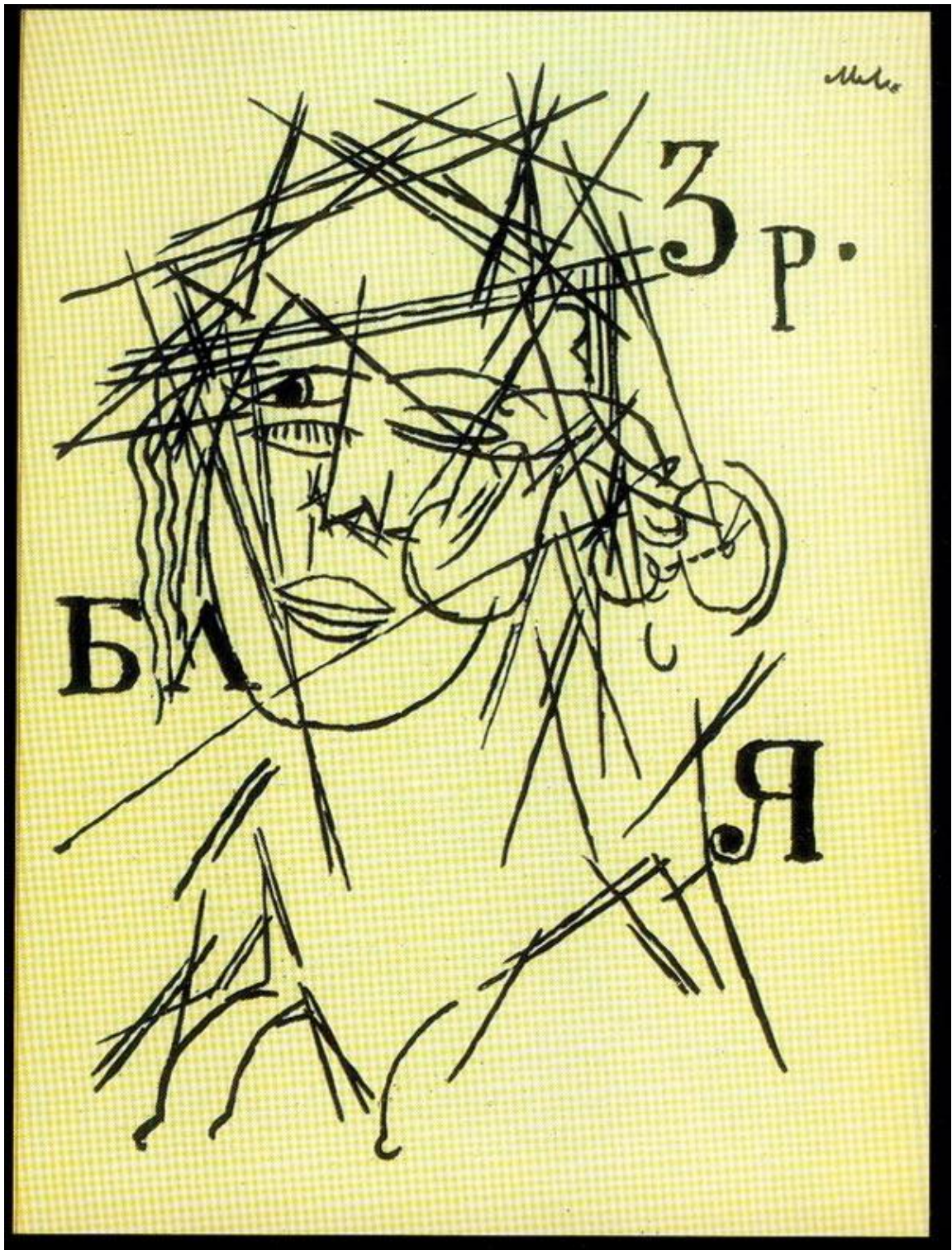


Figure IV.1. Mikhail Larionov. *Illustration Le Futur*, 1913. Illus.in Anthony Parton's *Mikhail Larionov* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1993) 64.



Figure IV.2. Still from the film *Drama in the Futurists' Cabaret No. 13*, 1914. Illus.in Anthony Parton's *Mikhail Larionov*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1993) 68.

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Vita

Ella Hans

Education

M.A., Art History, University of Kentucky – Lexington, KY;

Graduation: December 2011

Areas of concentration: Modernism, Contemporary Art.

Research interests: artistic publicity and promotion strategies in the early Russian Avant-garde period; Dada; Socialist Realism in Soviet Union, Underground Soviet Art.

MA Thesis: Defying the Modernist Canon: Mikhail Larionov's Artistic Experience Beyond the Canvas. Mentor: Robert Jensen, University of Kentucky, Department of Art

B.A., World Literature and Russian Language, Poltava State University – Poltava, Ukraine, 2004.

Thesis: "Linguistic Appropriation in Alexander Pushkin's 'Yevgeny Onegin.'"

Mentor: Larissa L. Bezobrazova, Poltava State University, Department of Russian Language. Training in art studio (concentration on painting); training and certification in "Portrait in Journalism" and "Journalist Investigation" from the Association of Journalists (*Le Monde*, France).

Work Experience

Lindsey Wilson College—Columbia, KY

AH347, Spring 2011, Art History Modern Through Contemporary Art

AH 237, Spring, 2011, Art History Survey Course, Renaissance Through Modern Art

Eastern Kentucky University—Richmond, KY, Corbin, KY

ENG 302, Spring 2011, guest lecturing, series of lectures, critical theory

ENG 102, Spring 2010, Eastern Kentucky University (guest lecturing, series of lectures on Contemporary Art).

University of Kentucky – Lexington, KY

Art History 106, Renaissance Through Modern Art, AH105, Summer 2008 (guest lecturing, series of lectures on Modernism in visual arts).

English Composition, ENG104, Spring 2008(guest lecturing, series of lectures on Modernism in visual arts).

Art History Survey Course, Renaissance Through Modern Art, AH 106, Spring 2008.

Art History Survey Course, Ancient Art Through Renaissance, AH105, Fall 2007.

Art History, Modernism in Eastern and Central Europe, AH340, Fall 2007 (guest lecturing, series of lectures on Russian Modernism).

Slavyansky Club Journal – Poltava, Ukraine

Assistant Editor, September 1999-August 2004

Additional Information

Languages: English, Russian, Ukrainian

Born 31 December 1971 in Russia